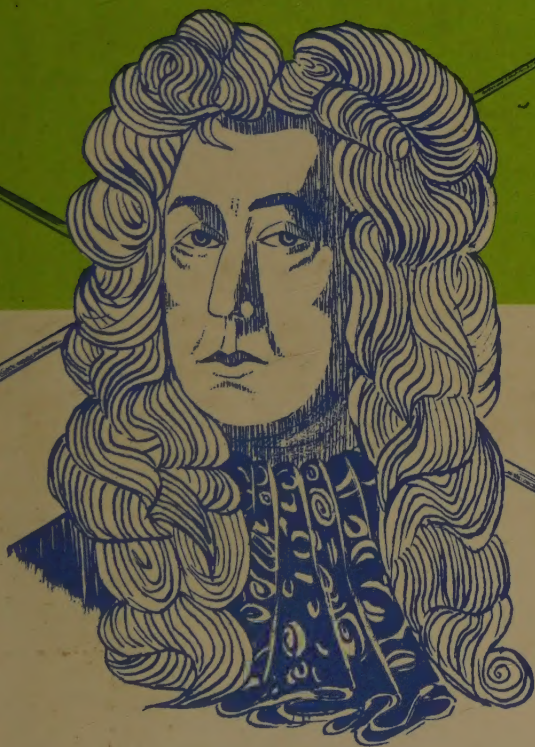


LANTERN LANE



Warwick Deeping

WARWICK DEEPING

LANTERN LANE

Lantern Lane is a variation of the classic story of a small man trying to make the 'big time'. In this instance it is a historical story, set in the time of Charles II.

The 'hero', if one can call him that, is a simple country gentleman who is suddenly fired with ambition to shine at the court of the King. His first attempts are, because of his country ways and lack of sophistication, dismal failures. But his discomfiture is to a certain extent compensated for by an array of mistresses, and the reader is treated to gallants and duels galore.

However, in the end he triumphs and not only wins a place at court, but one of its ladies for his wife as well.

This is a gay, amusing, even swashbuckling historical romance, which all readers of this type of story will certainly enjoy.

 **Wandsworth**

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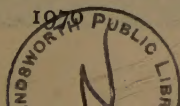
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WARWICK DEEPING

Originally published by
CASSELL and COMPANY LTD

This edition reprinted by
CEDRIC CHIVERS LTD
PORTWAY BATH



First Published 1921

X D238368 (47)

200054270

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LANTERN LANE

PART I

CHAPTER I

FAIRFAX pulled up his horse at the bottom of the bracken-covered hill, whose top was crowned by a wood of very old beeches. A girl had appeared out of the beeches. She stood with the green fronds of the ferns touching the bosom of her dress, and as the ferns moved in the wind she looked to be standing in the green surge of the sea.

"John," she shouted, "come and help."

Fairfax swung out of the saddle and led his horse up the hill, for the ground was a sieve of rabbit-holes and seamed with the earth that had been thrown out of the burrows. The girl looked hot. Her black hair was over her face, her right hand was all brown with soil, so was the bosom of her green dress, and she had a little patch of soil on her right cheek. Fairfax heard the complainings of a dog rising out of the side of the hill.

"The silly beast has got trapped," she explained. "I can't reach him. What a mess I am in!"

The man looked at her with the frankness of a brother.

"You are. Will you hold Prince?"

She caught the bridle.

"Take off your coat. One does not grub for a dog in a new coat. I suppose this is for London?"

Luce Paradell was sixteen, and she looked twelve, a rather gaunt girl with a big mouth, and direct, dark eyes the eyes of an impetuous child. In those days she

was all movement, all wind-blown, quick coloured life, very strong, very swift, quite unsubtle and fearless. She loved or she hated. Her opinions flew free as a bird. She had immense admirations, immense scorns. Her father and mother quarrelled over her wildness. Catharine Paradell wished Luce to be a beauty; her father asked that she should be happy.

Luce stood and watched John Fairfax at work upon the rabbit-hole and the extricating of an undisciplined spaniel pup. He had kicked in the overhanging crust about the hole, taken off his new red coat, turned up sleeves of new and fine linen, smiling at her with a brother's confidential friendliness. Fairfax was one of the big creatures in Luce's world of fine adventure. Somehow she always thought of him as John, and never as Jack. There was flattery, the most delicate and virginal flattery in the distinction, and Fairfax was to be hurt by it and made the wiser by it in the days that were to come. He was to be an Elizabethan at the Court of Charles the Second.

He lay down and reached for the puppy.

"Come here, silly."

"Do mind your shirt!" she said.

She would not have minded about anybody's shirt but John's. She thought no more of her own dresses than she did of the grass she walked on.

"He is stuck with his head down the hole."

Fairfax wriggled a shoulder into the burrow and lay stretched on his side, one cheek against the turf. He was laughing a little, for he had a way of laughing when he was baffled; such laughter has saved men from the bottomless pit.

"Got him!"

He drew out a very earthy looking spaniel, and sitting up, held the beast playfully between his two hands.

"That is not the way to heaven, Sir Pup."

Luce very seriously took the dog and cuffed his head. He looked sulky, resigned, but he did not whimper.

"That's for disobedience. Look at Mr. Fairfax's shirt."

She put the dog down, handed Fairfax the red coat

that he had thrown over the saddle, and watched him while he put it on. The seriousness with which she had chastised the spaniel remained in her eyes. Her father had written a sonnet on Luce's serious moments. In it she was the eyes of heaven, Britomart as a babe, April wondering at the green of her own year.

"Why are you going to London, John?"

"To make my fortune," he laughed.

She nodded her head.

"Like Sir Philip Sidney at the Court of Elizabeth. Men cannot stay in the country. Are you coming home with me?"

"I was on my way there. Sir Philip and Lady Catharine are at home?"

"Yes. We shall miss you, John."

"London is only thirty miles away," he said.

He put his arm through the bridle and they walked down the hill to the grass ride through the woods. Luce Paradell's eyes were as solemn as the woods. In the mystery of her virginal visions John Fairfax became a great soldier and a great poet, a man with a serene strong face moving in a crowd of lesser men. That is what she wished him to be, what those dark, direct, virginal eyes of hers thought to behold. She did not know how men get adrift in a sea of passion, in a world of anger, envy, jealousy, pride. Serenity is not to the young, and there was no serenity at the Court of the King. Men fought there for pre-eminence with tongues and the threat of a sword. Ridicule held the coats of those who fought. The beaten dog was driven out with howls and laughter, or with some insolent quip that was more merciless than a blow.

"Will you write me a letter, John?"

"Of course," said he.

He was like a big boy to a small boy in his attitude towards Luce. There was no sex in her as yet, or Fairfax had not felt it. He liked the shine of her eyes, her buoyancy, her frankness, her freckles and her tumbled hair. In some subtle sort of way she made him feel a big fellow, very strong, a man of the wide world. Fairfax was human. No one had told him that he was little better than a

bumpkin, in spite of Winchester, Oxford and Shere Hall.

They came out of the woods and into the park. The green spaces between the oaks and beeches and the ancient thorns led like so many quiet rivers to the great house of the Paradells. The grass was long and full of red sorrel and great white daisies, grass that caught the sunlight and held it in a shimmering net. Fernhurst stood proudly, looking south, the gilt cupola of its red brick belfry flashing like the helmet of a giant, its broad terraces and spacious steps serene and stately. The house had a central court and two wings, and was built of richly toned brick. It had been fired on by Waller in the great war, and the brick dovecot at the end of the garden wall had had a part of its cornice shot away. Paradell had left it so.

"Unless a man sees with his eyes he forgets," he said.

Sir Philip Paradell met them on the steps of the terrace, and rubbing the powdering of brown earth from Luce's cheek, looked over her shoulder at Fairfax. He liked the man, liked him so well that even his natural jealousy was not greatly disturbed. Paradell had quiet eyes, and a body and a soul that refused to be flurried; he was the gentlest of cynics; life needed cultivating like a garden, and all through the seasons this bland and handsome man had planted his philosophy as a shelter against woman's weather.

The clock in the bell tower struck the hour.

"Lordy," said the girl, "we are late for dinner! John had to pull Rupert out of a rabbit-hole."

"And in that new coat! Oh, John, John!"

"I made him take it off. He is riding to London in it."

They moved up the steps and across the terrace, Luce holding her father's arm. But Paradell's eyes were looking at Fairfax. They were the eyes of a calm maturity looking at youth, the eyes of a physician.

"So you cannot keep away from Whitehall?"

"I'm young, sir," said Fairfax.

"An honest reason. What says Luce?"

"Of course he must go, Father. He cannot spend his life pulling dogs out of rabbit-holes."

Paradell laughed.

"Why, that is life!" And then his laughter smoothed itself into a handsome urbanity, for my Lady had stepped out of one of the long windows and was waiting, and an attitude of waiting did not suit Paradell's wife. She was a woman whose temper was so difficult that you had to pick up the pins or she would quarrel with them. Her sallowness seemed to feel the cold; she was always on the edge of a shiver, and her most characteristic posture was that of folding a cloak over her bosom. The gesture was spiritual as well as physical. This dark Athene had been a cold seeker after sunshine, and she had never found it; she had wished men to make love to her, and she was ending life with a philosopher. She did not realize that it was she herself who had created the philosopher.

Her eyes went at once to Luce's earth stains. She almost ignored Fairfax and the sweep of his hat. He was very polite to her on all occasions, and she knew that it meant hatred.

"It does not matter," she said—"to-day."

Luce looked at her mother. There was a curious sympathy between these two, though Catharine Paradell was cold, and the girl hot. Perhaps it was a mutual frankness that made them friends. This cold woman showed the girl a mirror, and always without that anger that the rest of the world received. She would say things to Luce that Paradell would not have whispered to his wife.

"Why does it not matter, Mother?"

My Lady's answer was a sudden brilliant smile given full in Fairfax's face. Her dislike was masked, gracious.

"Be careful how you play at soiling your coat, Master John."

"You poop," she was saying to herself, "you self-sure, country lion! Go up to London and let them give you the head of an ass. I'll take care the girl shall hear you bray."

They went in to dinner in the oak dining-room with the red taffeta hangings and curtains of red velvet. The chairs had seats of stamped leather. The polished table had no cloth, and the silver and the flowers were reflected

in it, making a double pattern. There were suits of damascened armour on either side of the buffet, and a trophy of swords and pistols over the mantelshelf. In the middle of the table stood a great bowl of roses.

Luce pulled out a red rose and threw it across the table to John Fairfax. She was very frank with her favours in those days. My Lady watched Fairfax wondering what to do with the flower; he seemed undecided whether to wear it or leave it on the table, and my Lady smiled.

"It does not matter to-day, Mr. Fairfax. So you are to be a pupil of Sir Roger Pagan's?"

"That is so, madam."

"Carry him my compliments; we used to be friends in the old days."

She yawned slightly and then scolded one of the servants for filling a tankard so that the froth spilled itself on the table. Paradell began to talk smoothly, smiling at Fairfax, and compelling the younger man to share the conversation with him. Luce remained mute. She was wondering why her mother smiled at John like a mirror reflecting hard winter sunlight.

After dinner the men smoked, and my Lady and Luce sat in the belvedere at the end of the terrace and played a game of questions and answers.

"Why did you say it did not matter?"

"What, my sweet?"

"The dirt on my dress."

"There was no one there to see."

"John was there," said the girl.

Catharine Paradell answered her with unusual gentleness.

"John would not mind. There are certain things that John does not see. He is a very good young man."

"Mother—how horrible!"

"My dear, I thought you loved goodness."

"I don't know," said Luce, "it depends. But do you really think that John is so good? I don't."

Her mother looked up sharply.

"Gracious, child, how should you know? An excellent young man——"

And then she laughed; something had amused her, one of those cynical thoughts that continue to make life

interesting when the glamour of it has gone. The two men appeared on the terrace; Paradell had Fairfax by the arm; he was being fatherly. Good God, what fools men were—how she hated them! She smiled at Luce, and in the ice of her smile there was a foreknowledge of the girl's ultimate beauty, the power she would exert over men. Catharine Paradell had not been able to hurt men as she wished to hurt them, but she might hurt them with the beauty of her daughter.

Fairfax was coming to take his leave. A groom had brought his horse to the park gate, and to-morrow would see John Fairfax on the road to London. Catharine Paradell showed a sudden animation. She left her chair, laid an almost intimate finger on Fairfax's sleeve, and made him walk the length of the terrace. Paradell watched them, frowning slightly. Why this graciousness, this sudden vivacity? "

"My friend," said the lady, "do you know that Luce is sixteen?"

"She is a child still."

"Idiot!" was her inward answer.

She paused at the end of the terrace, and gazed with a sudden air of soft melancholy at the roses in Paradell's favourite borders, a sentimental figure. Men always demanded sentimentality in women and hated it when they got it. Such fools! This gentle John would expect her to be the conventional mother, and she would poison him with sweet words.

"Mr. Fairfax," she said, not looking at him, "it is easy for a mother to see that the child dotes on you. I would ask you to be chivalrous, careful—love is so easily hurt."

"Madam——!"

He was discomfited, perplexed, like a man who is asked to enjoy the delicate perfume of a flower and has it crushed against his nostrils.

"John, not a word! Let it be a mother's secret, but being a mother I could not let you go without speaking about the child. I believe you to be generous; you will know how to act."

His embarrassment was so obvious that she was ready to laugh.

"Luce is such a child. I had no thought——"

"My dear," she hurried to say, "I accuse you of nothing. These things happen, but if a man feels nothing in his heart he will be careful how he comes or how he stays away. And now—good-bye."

She led him back and smiled at Luce.

"Run down to the gate, my sweet. You will never see John again as he is to-day."

She watched them go down the steps together, not troubling herself to look at Paradell or to wonder whether he suspected. There was so much philosophy in her husband that she had come to think of him as the wisest fool on earth.

"Kate——"

"My dear——"

The words annoyed him. She was in such exquisite good humour that he, knowing her English weather, expected a frost or a thunderstorm.

"Is it impertinent of me to wonder what you said to that young man?"

"Not in the least. I told him Luce loved him."

He flushed up, and the arteries stood out on his temples.

"What conceivable reason had you for that? Could anything be more—blatant—more damning——!"

"Dear sir, that was my reason. Do you think I would have Luce marry that fool? A man never wants his love ready picked for him."

"So you would cheapen the child in order to disgust the man with her. By the splendour of God, Kate, it is beyond my soul to forgive you."

"That is what men always say," she retorted, "and a year later they think that the wisdom was theirs."

CHAPTER II

SHERE HALL lay in a hollow, and so steep were the sides of the valley that the house seemed sunk in a green pit. From the beech woods above you could look into the throats of its twisted chimneys and trace all the quaint outlines of its gables and red roof-spans with the broad blue leads between them, the gutters and water-shoots, platform and bell-cage. The hills were a smother of great oaks and beeches with little tongues of rich grass land running up between them. From above on the hillside the garden could be read like a map. You saw the lawn with its sun-dial, the two cedars, the yew walk, the rosery, the herb garden, the fruit garden, the brick wall and terrace above the park, and below the wall lay the pool where the stream had been dammed to make a fair sheet of water.

John Fairfax rode home by the hill track and he saw his house of Shere as a winging heron or a poised hawk might have seen it, yet the place gave no pause to his thoughts. The house was splashed with sunlight in the midst of all the greenness of its secret valley, but to Fairfax it was an old man's house or the house of a quiet gentleman whose life's adventure had ended with a bevy of children. It slept. John Fairfax was young.

His thoughts and ambitions were elsewhere—treading the galleries and courts of that wonderful world of Whitehall. Colour, music, the gallant flash of a sword, the splendour of a sonnet, the insolence of beauty, masked faces, the great river and its life, the play-houses, the parks and gardens! England had grown young again with a young king, gay, courteous, and the return of the spring. The Maypoles were up, boys were not damned for kicking a football on Sunday. Charles had come in with joy and laughter, and London had gone mad, not troubling itself

to wonder what were the thoughts behind that swarthy, shrewd, sardonic face: the London that had killed his father. John Puritan had shrunk in his breeches; the snuffle was out of the nose of England, and though the ghastly smell of fanaticism was to hang about for some two hundred years, it was a smell of decay, of a thing that was dead.

This new world called to the young, and it called to John Fairfax out of the green wood of Surrey. He saw a thousand little figures in colours of scarlet, of white, green, purple, and blue, dancing, fighting, making love, moving to music. Shere, with all its beauty, was mere green ooze, and freckled Luce less than a boy's playmate. My Lady's confession had not troubled Fairfax's heart, and if it had flattered his good nature, it had not discovered in him the complacent beast.

"Poor little Luce," that was how he thought of her—as something that he liked very well, because, like a dog she loved him. He had no thought of hurting her. The proud flesh of his youth had not been touched with the hot iron.

He found Jeremy, his man, packing a valise. White shirts, ruffles, lace collars, a walking-sword, a blue satin doublet, silk hose, a pair of plum-coloured petticoat breeches were laid out on the quilt of the four-post bed. Jeremy was a comely boy, rather soft and boastful. The affair was as much an adventure to him as it was to Fairfax, and the kitchen-maids had admired him in his new blue livery with its silver buttons. They were a pair of innocents.

"Hal wanted to know, sir, at what hour he shall bring out the horses?"

"At eight, Jeremy. And don't forget the pistols."

"I have fresh primed 'em, sir. Lord, but I'd like a snap at a highwayman."

Fairfax laughed. Not doubting his own courage, he did not doubt Jeremy's.

Two days later Fairfax was supping in his lodging in the Strand. He had a sleeping-room on the first floor, with a broad window looking out upon the street, and giving

a glimpse of the gardens and casements of the Queen Dowager's palace. The room was furnished and panelled in oak, with cushions of red velvet on the window-seat, and a Turkey rug on the table. The silver would not have been out of place upon a gentleman's buffet, and the candles in the candle-sconces were of the best wax.

Fairfax had found a letter waiting for him. It had been left by his uncle's man.

"DEAR NEPHEW,—I shall await the pleasure of your calling on me at St. Martin's Lane. Since I am sluggish after supper, and my legs and the daylight are not of equal length, you will discover me in my chair at any hour after six. I have no doubt that you have found your lodgings all that you desire. I sent Purvis in person to speak with Honeyman. H. is a good soul, and had his temper trained by twenty years' service as my Lord B.'s butler. Have a care of one thing, John. Do not ask after the health of the fellow's wife. It reddens him.—PAGAN."

Fairfax buckled on his walking-sword and stamped on the floor for Jeremy.

"Get your staff and hat, man, we are walking to Sir Roger's."

By the door hung a little Venetian mirror in which a gentleman might scan himself as he went out, but Fairfax did not look in the mirror. He had not learnt the trick, nor was he ever to learn it; his life's mirror was to be the look that he found in other men's eyes. Honeyman babbled to him on the stairs, flattening himself against the wainscoting.

"I trust, sir, that you find yourself well lodged?"

Fairfax smiled at the man.

"Excellently so."

Honeyman watched him pass out with Jeremy at his heels, and Honeyman was no mean judge of a man. Fairfax puzzled him.

"A gentleman is very sure of himself when he smiles at a servant."

Sir Roger Pagan's house in St. Martin's Lane was built

in the new style, with nothing but a gravel walk and a row of posts between it and the street. Pagan was not a man who buried himself in gardens. He had his garden at the back of the house, with its bowling-green, plane trees, and gravelled walks, but his life fronted on the highway and he watched men rather than trees.

Jeremy knocked at the house door with his staff, and then grinned at his master.

"Maybe you will be here an hour, sir."

"Your eyes are itching for some of the sights, Jeremy? Run along with you, but don't get into trouble."

"Trouble! Bless me, sir, what trouble?"

"London is not Shere, my lad."

Sir Roger Pagan's door opened, and a big, rich easy voice was heard in the house. "Is that John Fairfax? Show him in, Purvis." Pagan was as handsome as his voice. He came out into the hall with his hands outstretched, limping slightly from an old wound, his hair quite white, for he scorned dyes and periwigs. He had always been a masterful man and a great fighter, splendid in his manners, a courtier whose irony had been as dangerous as his sword. His thick black eyebrows seemed in curious contrast to his white hair. His eyes still had that arch, shrewd, valiant look that had made him irresistible to women, and if life had placed a little scorn in the curve of his nostrils and in the implacable straightness of his mouth, he was too human to be bitter.

"Well, John, well?"

He held Fairfax's hands in a strong grip, measuring him.

"I hope I am as well as you look, sir."

"Now that's pretty! I cannot say that you have grown, John, or you might think me a gaffer. Purvis, a bottle of that old wine."

They passed into that spacious room whose casements opened on the street, Pagan's arm over his nephew's shoulder, his eyes kind and interested. For youth had an unfailing fascination for Roger Pagan, youth with all its surprises marching on the edge of the unknown. It was a book that he loved to read, the noblest book on the knees of a wise man, and John Fairfax was his nephew.

"Sit you down, John."

He contrived it so that the younger man faced the light from the window.

"And how is our Honeyman?"

"Most outrageously polite, sir."

"What, it irks you? You want to swing those shoulders of yours."

He smiled, and sitting with that long chin of his gripped between thumb and forefinger, watched Purvis bring in the wine and the two Venetian glasses on a salver of silver. Fairfax took his glass with an easy reach of the hand. He did not hold the glass to the light, or sip the wine, but drank and drank naturally. Life was a straightforward affair.

"Do you make love like that, John?"

"How, sir?"

"No matter. I'm a quiz. Tell me about Shere. Too green and soft, eh?"

"Shere is just what it was, a good place to dream in."

"Ah, too many trees. You should go and quarrel with John Evelyn, your neighbour. But an old man is supposed to be serious, and yet the secret of the day is—'never seem to be serious.'"

"That's not easy, sir."

Fairfax looked at his glass of wine, drank, and looked again at the glass. There can be nothing more serious than youth, and Sir Roger Pagan knew that truth so well. At twenty-five his own seriousness had tried to climb to the moon, and the fall that it had given him had taught him that a man must learn to laugh, even though his laughter may sound like the laughter of the damned. He saw John Fairfax as a rather swarthy young man, slightly pock-marked, with a good forehead, a generous mouth, and a blunt nose that would walk straight into an adventure without scenting the cost. He was direct, hot blooded, square in the head and shoulders, but without that delicate and serene cunning that only wounds can give. Pagan liked the lad, his air of solid naturalness, his grave eyes that smiled so easily. He might be a rustic, but the intense blood was there.

"Do you smoke, John?"

" Sometimes, sir."

" You will find a leash of new clays and the tobacco-jar in the cupboard by the fireplace. Call to Purvis to bring a candle and spills."

Fairfax had walked to his uncle's house feeling that he was to meet a stranger, and he had found a man to whom you could speak as you spoke to your inmost self. Pagan was everything, from a cynic to a saint; he had lived through everything, and he had learnt to know things. His wisdom was the wisdom of the heart as well as of the head. This old Ulysses with his grand, serene, sagacious face was as broad as the sea, a sea for youth to sail upon.

He led Fairfax on and had the young man speaking of the things that were near his heart. The lad was no puppet, no country Jack come to town with a soul that grinned through a horse-collar. He was intense. There was a suggestion of fanaticism in his steady, grey blue eyes. Roger Pagan's heart warmed to him. He heard the cry of his own youth.

" You should have lived just a hundred years ago, John."

" Why, sir ? "

" I'll tell you. Take the poets and the playwrights. You did post to me some of your sonnets, and I read them and in reading them heard the voices of the men of Elizabeth. You have been living with Marlowe and Spenser, my lad, Shakespeare and Ben. Men flew at the inspiration like hawks in those spacious days. Look at the moderns. What have you ? Robert Herrick, a pleasant pretty soul ; Waller, a gentlemanly weathercock ; D'Avenant, Killigrew, Cowley, fat and sententious. Tame doves, John, and very tame at that. Well, what of the world ? Is anyone in earnest ? "

" You, sir, perhaps ? "

" John, I sit at a window and watch ; my days are over, and yet I can love a man who dares to fly high. I walk to Whitehall, I make my bow, I talk to the ladies, try not to discover the young men insolent. In these days life is a game, and you play it with tongue and sword."

Fairfax leant forward with his elbows on his knees.

" I am ambitious," he said.

"What sort of ambition, John?"

"You will think me a coxcomb, sir."

"A gallant fool perhaps, but that—never."

"I have a passion to do big things. I want to be one of those who walk by right of power into the King's closet."

Old Pagan's eyes narrowed; his black brows seemed to grow more prominent. He sat very straight in his high-backed chair, looking inwards upon the memory of his own youth and all that life had taught him.

Presently he began to speak:

"So you are for the great game, the game of kings and of statesmen? It is a greater game than the chasing of petticoats. Your old player can lecture you on the fine points and the cunning of the game, John, but each one must play the game of life for himself. I assure you that in these days it is not easy."

"I am ready to learn, sir."

"Can you play the fool, and hide this ambition of yours behind a face that is never serious? I wonder!"

"I can laugh."

"There are the various sorts of laughter. You must jostle men without seeming to push, and if your shoulders are too honest, then, by the Lord, you must have a ready sword, a swift insolence, the touch of the devil. You do not know this city of ours as I know it; forgive me for preaching. At Whitehall there are scores of young men whose ambition is as fierce as yours, ready to turn on a rival and to rend him, and to do it between the combing of their hair. Take this country boy of yours whom I heard you sending out for a little swagger in the streets. He is strong and lusty and full of the pride of youth, and yet but a silly pigeon."

"Jeremy is an honest lad."

"Honest! Honesty is but a virgin made to be stripped in the twinkling of an eye. Hallo, what's this?"

For, like an ass braying a blessing on the text, Fairfax's lackey stood at the open window, hatless, buttonless, a trickle of "claret" still running from his nose. He blubbered.

"Oh, Mr. John!"

Fairfax rose from his chair.

"What's this, Jerry?"

"I've been set upon, sir. I met two fellows near a tavern by the Cross, and very friendly they were. I went with them into an alley thereabouts to see a blackamoor who, they said, bit swords in half. In the alley half a dozen set on me, cut off my silver buttons, took my purse, sir, and my hat."

He blubbered, and rubbing his bloody nose, kept looking at the stains on his knuckles.

"Didn't you fight, man?"

"They had tricks as I'd never heard of, Mr. John. One nipped m' wind-pipe from behind. I was kicked in th' soft parts, sir."

Old Pagan was stifling a laugh.

"Go round to the kitchen, lad," he said kindly, "and they will give you something to cheer you. Send Purvis to me."

When Jeremy had gone, he looked at Fairfax.

"Whitehall is like that, John, only a little more gentlemanly in its methods. And it does not cut off silver buttons, but the pride and the courage off a man's soul."

CHAPTER III

LONDON has been ever the same, a mischievous "beauty" looking out of her window and filling the hearts and heads of men with a restlessness that desires the moon and the stars. A thousand lattices, a thousand courtyards dimly lit by a thousand ancient lanterns, a thousand doors that open and close. Dim figures passing in dim streets, a flash of the eyes, a turn of the head! Here and there a sound of music, laughter, or the frightened silence that follows a brawl or a quarrel! A coach rolling past in the dark, or some noble going with torch-flare to his lodging. In such a city mysterious adventures wait at the dark corners for those to whom they are fated to happen.

Fairfax sat at the table writing a letter, the letter that had been promised to Luce Paradell, and the writing of it bored him. He had nothing to say, for nothing had happened, and the loss of Jeremy's silver buttons seemed to lack the dignity of an adventure. Another letter lay on the table near to Fairfax's left elbow, a letter of three words:

"Be patient.—PAGAN."

Fairfax looked at it and smiled. He was ready to wait upon that wise man's words, but the tranquil room and the straight flames of the candles were too much his to be exciting. It was growing late, but a few people still passed to and fro in the street; and those footfalls would not leave him in peace. They were so tantalizing, those footsteps of unknown men and women. Where were they going; what was in the hearts of the people who hurried—whither?

Fairfax threw down the quill. He had not written a word to Luce during the last few minutes, for he had been listening to those footsteps. They were calling him

out into the darkness, mocking a man who sat alone in a room when life and the night were restless together. Fairfax folded the unfinished letter and slipped it between the pages of a book. His sword and hat hung on the back of a chair ; he took them and went out on to the stairs.

Honeyman was barring the street door. He looked round at the gentleman on the stairs.

" I thought you were a-bed, sir."

" I have business, Honeyman. Tell Jerry to sit up."

Honeyman removed the bar, and opening the door, made as though to say something, but thought better of it and held his tongue. The young man was not one who would be grateful for being told that the streets were none too safe at such an hour. He watched Fairfax out, saw him turn towards Charing Cross, and withdrew like a staid old dog into his kennel.

" Business ! " he said ; " he hasn't taken long to learn it ! "

Fairfax felt himself breathing more deeply in the night air. He had turned westwards, for all the romance and the zest of life seemed to lie in the west, and " Westward ho ! " was the cry of his heart. His thoughts were at Whitehall and not with the City. The Strand was growing dark and empty. Round about the Cross, the smaller taverns were putting out their lights, and as he passed the " Red Lion " opposite the end of Cockspur Street, two gentlemen came out and stood talking, their hats drawn down over their faces, their cloaks covering their chins. The taller of the two looked hard at Fairfax in the light from the " Red Lion " windows, but Fairfax walked on.

" Damnation, Teg," said the man who had stared, " I thought it was our fellow."

Fairfax walked on along Pall Mall. The wall of the park was on his left, and its trees showed as bosky masses under the stars, and presently he came to a place where a portion of the wall had been taken down. Much work was being done in the park ; new trees had been planted the previous winter, the canal was being dug, and the ground raised beside Rosamund's Pool. It was very silent and deserted, and Fairfax found himself listening

to a little distant noise, the passing of the night's gaiety in Spring Gardens. He strolled on down one of the paths, his face towards Whitehall, and coming to an avenue of trees he turned aside, and stood leaning against one of the tree trunks.

Immensity and the stars! From under the dark fringe of the leaves he could look up at those stars, and gaze at those lesser but even more mysterious luminaries—the lights of Whitehall. They were dying down now, for those hundreds of gentlemen and gentlewomen, the King, his nobles, the swarms of servants were a-bed. Yet the shadowy bulk of the palace had a fascination for John Fairfax. It was the new world in which he desired to play his part, and his head was full of its resounding titles. The Lord Steward, the Lord Chamberlain, the Master of the Horse, the Treasurer, the Master of the Household, the Knight Harbinger, the Vice-Chamberlain, the Keeper of the Privy Purse! The Gentlemen of the Bedchamber, the Grooms of the Bedchamber, the Gentlemen Ushers, the Black Rod, the Sergeant-at-Arms, the Physicians, the Yeomen, the Heralds, the Pursuivants, the Guards. The sun, the planets, the stars! He was so near to it all, an unknown man, a mere gentleman of Surrey, and yet there was a tingling in his blood and a fierce whisper of exultation.

His hand touched the hilt of his sword. The touch prompted other thoughts, naif, almost boyish. He wished that he was a little more expert with the sword; old Pagan had recommended his own fencing-master, and the fellow had flattered a new pupil, but Fairfax had felt the expert playing with him. Well, that was a matter that could be soon mended. He knew his own strength; he had proved it with horses and with men. He could write a passable sonnet, quote the classics, dance, speak some French, turn a phrase, look a man straight in the eyes. He did not think that he feared anything, save the thing that all proud men fear—scorn, a scorn that is deserved.

Suddenly he heard voices, and turned his head to listen. It was no more than a mere breaking of the silence, for he could not distinguish what the voices said. "Some lovers," he thought, and felt a vague jealousy of the loiterers

whom he could not see. The voices belonged to a man and a woman.

The two figures were standing close together some fifty yards from Fairfax's tree, and in the deep shade of the avenue.

"It is the seventh tree on the right," said the man's voice; "this is the cross-path to the Mall."

"You will wait here?"

"Till I hear you laugh. It will tell me that the infatuation holds. God bless thee, Barb."

He kissed her hand, and the woman moved away. She came slowly down the avenue, counting the trees, and walking so softly on the grass beneath them that Fairfax did not hear her. She drew near and paused within five yards of him. His figure was distinguishable as a dark outline breaking the straightness of the tree trunk.

"Is my lord asleep?"

Fairfax swung round. There was a note of raillery in the voice of this woman who had surprised him in the darkness.

"No, I am not asleep."

He had an unusually deep voice, and at the sound of it the woman stood very still. She was cloaked, hooded, and masked, and for some seconds she did not speak. There was a tenseness in the silence, the suggestion of a crisis, the instant rearrangement of some secret situation.

"Seven is a good number, my lord," she said.

"It is better than thirteen, madam; that is all I can say about it. But why seven?"

She came and stood close to him, a tall figure looking even taller in its cloak. He was aware of a fragrance, a perfume, and it came from her clothes. He had the indefinable feeling of being close to a great lady, a woman whose clothes were as rich as the perfume. Her voice was very quiet and calm. She was no orange-girl, no Bess of the Back Streets.

"We are at cross-purposes," she said, "or perhaps my lord is laughing at me."

"I am neither laughing, madam, nor am I a lord."

"Dear soul, what a jest! And will you tell me who

prevailed upon you to come and stand under this very tree ? ”

“ My own whim, nothing more.”

“ I can hardly believe you.”

Fairfax felt a sudden warmth about his ears.

“ It is the truth, madam, and perhaps—if you are honest—you will tell me that I should be more welcome elsewhere.”

“ How so ? ”

“ My lord might not be pleased to find me here. I will not expose you to so churlish a mischance.”

He bowed and drew back, but she stretched out a quick, imperious hand.

“ Stay where you are. Were this some shallow jest I would let you go. Stay ! Do you understand me ? ”

“ Am I to receive orders, madam ? ”

“ My friend,” she said, “ you have a certain sharpness of tongue. I like you none the worse for it. Tell me your name.”

“ I see no reason why I should tell it you.”

“ Reason ! Do you ask for a reason when an adventure comes to you ? Yet could I give you twenty reasons why you should confess to me, and the first and the greatest of them is that I have asked you.”

He stood looking straight at the dim gleam of the eyes behind the mask.

“ My name is John Fairfax.”

“ I know it not,” she said.

“ Is that my shame or my glory ? ”

“ By my soul, you have a readiness that is almost insolent. Whence do you come ? ”

“ I am a gentleman of Surrey, nephew to Sir Roger Pagan. Is that name unknown to you, madam ? ”

“ Strange, hey ! A Pagan who is the best Christian of them all. Wait there. I must speak with my friend.”

“ Madam, all this is beyond me ! ”

“ Wait,” she said ; “ you shall not regret it.”

She walked back down the avenue to where the man was waiting, leaning against the trunk of a tree. He came quickly forward a few steps to meet her.

“ So young Mortimer is something of a lawyer ? ”

“ It is not Mortimer,” she said.

"What! He has sent some lackey? By the splendour of God!"

She drew close and spoke to him quickly, and with the softness that steals into the voice of a woman who loves. He stood with a hand on her shoulder, listening, and prodding the turf with the cane that he carried.

"Damnation! Has the Devil or God sent us a substitute? Who is the fellow, Barbara? Could you discover?"

"A certain John Fairfax."

"Name of ill omen."

"He says that he is a nephew of old Pagan's."

"A bumpkin! Lass, his uncle has spoken of him to me. A young gentleman with ambitions! Why should he not serve?"

And then he drew her to him with an air of tenderness.

"But it is for you to say nay to that, if you so choose, my Secret Life. God knows I would give you no commands that would hurt your heart."

She bent her head and kissed his wrist.

"Dear lord, what I do I do with my whole strength. This rustic has a clean air and a certain wit and manliness."

"What, a rival!"

His playfulness was without cynicism.

"Have I no rivals?"

"The stuffed dolls we put in the window! I would give you all, dear life, were it possible, as well as all the part you hold, the part of me that the world will never see, myself, my faith, my revenge. Well, am I to speak to the young man?"

"If it is wise."

"I'll trust old Pagan's word, even though the man is his nephew. Send him to me, dear, and wait by the tree."

John Fairfax was walking up and down, unable to decide whether his tarrying for the woman's return was not a piece of supreme folly. He heard the two cease speaking and saw her reappear between the dark shadow masses of the trees. He stood still and waited.

"Master Fairfax."

"Madam?"

"My friend would speak with you."

"I see no reason for it, madam."

"None the less you will go, nor will you regret it."

Fairfax bowed to her, his left hand on the hilt of his sword. He walked slowly down the avenue, half expecting to be set upon as the scapegoat of some mysterious intrigue, and yet he had a young man's desire to see the thing through, to play up to the tune of his own pride. When he had walked some forty paces he became aware of a figure waiting under the branches of a tree. He paused and spoke :

"The lady has sent me. What do you want ? "

The man came forward, and Fairfax saw that he was wearing a plumed hat and a cloak caught up and fastened over the left shoulder. He carried what Fairfax first thought to be a sword, only to discover that it was nothing more deadly than a light walking-cane. The man used it with a characteristic swing of the arm, a spacious and rather stately gesture.

"Good evening to you, John Fairfax."

Fairfax stood with his head up, alert, suspicious.

"So you have my name. Before we go further you will tell me yours."

"With the best will in the world, John. I am your king."

Fairfax stared, went back a step, and then swept off his hat with a stiff bow. His astonishment was hidden by the darkness. He had a suspicion that Charles was smiling.

"Well, John, do you believe me ? "

"Your Majesty——"

"You half expected to cross swords with some ruffler, and you find nothing but your king and a walking-stick. Your uncle, Sir Roger Pagan, was with me to-day."

Fairfax bowed again and less stiffly.

"Will your Majesty deign to command me ? "

Charles raised his cane and tapped Fairfax on the shoulder.

"Man, can you obey ? "

The temper of his voice had changed. The playfulness had gone from it, and it was the voice of the master, sharp, vibrant, intense.

"If your Majesty will try me."

"Listen, John Fairfax. What is obedience? To see everything and nothing, to hear and to be deaf. To ask no questions, and to expect no answer. That is the obedience that I demand. No light matter, mark you, no honours to be lightly worn, and I am no fool to ask it of ordinary men, of these shopkeepers and ranters who know better than God how men may get to Hell and Heaven. What say you?"

Fairfax stood a moment in silence.

"Your Majesty, I seal my eyes, mouth and ears with your honour."

"Good. You will return to that lady and tell her that it is my pleasure that you conduct her to her house. Tomorrow you will hold yourself ready to wait upon me. That is all."

CHAPTER IV

FAIRFAX found himself bowing to the lady.

"Madam, my orders are to conduct you to your house."

"Thank you, Mr. Formality; it grieves me to trespass upon your kindness."

She turned in the direction of St. James's, and Fairfax set himself beside her, piqued by an irony that seemed utterly without malice. Even in the darkness her presence was a rich perfume, a stately movement, a nearness that woke in him a romantic curiosity. Who was she? What was her age? Why had she come here alone with the King?

He could think of nothing to say to her, nor did she question his silence. He was a probationer in the great house of adventure, a rustic, an untried boy, and she was a little mistrustful of so green a servant. Her silence was impartial. She wished to see how the man would shape.

When they reached St. James's Street she tried him with five words:

"Can you use a sword?"

"A little."

That was his only answer. He did not qualify its simplicity or try to play at gallantry by turning the possible service into a romantic inspiration. "For you, madam, yes." That was what the Court gallant should have said—and Fairfax did not say it. She liked the absence of swagger, and his return to his previous silence.

It was she who led, for Fairfax could not have found the road even if he had had the slightest notion where they were going. They were soon among fields and gardens, with an occasional house dark behind the trees and walls, and Fairfax, with a glance at the pole star, judged that they were moving north. The scent of new mown hay mingled with the scent of my lady's clothes.

She had noticed that upward, calculating look of his and read it aright. His wits were working behind his silence.

"Yes, it is north."

"I thought so, madam."

"Could you find the way again in the daylight?"

"I am counting the number of houses we pass. That would help."

"It is pleasant," she said, "to deal with a man who is not a fool."

Somehow he felt that was great praise from her, and that his silence was less foolish than it had seemed. He noticed that they crossed a broadish highway and entered a lane that ran between fields and gardens. The hedges were very high in places and lined with elms and beeches, making the lane a dark tunnel that curved slightly towards the east. My lady walked fast in spite of the darkness, and in the silence of the lane Fairfax heard the soft rustling of her clothes.

They came out again under the arch of the starlit sky.

"How beautiful it is."

"Very beautiful, madam," said he.

She laughed lightly.

"And I walk with Sir Echo. Are you so much afraid of me, Mr. Fairfax?"

"If it would please you I could tell your ladyship the names of the stars."

"And hide your curiosity behind my supposed ignorance!"

"I do not suspect you of ignorance, but you suspect me of curiosity."

"I hope so. Curiosity is human; so is ambition."

"Yes, I am ambitious," he said.

She looked at him with oblique interest.

"What a lure it is! What a battle of wits and of passions—and of beasts! And so often it is the Dragon who devours St. George. Being an old woman, I have seen it."

"Old!"

The word slipped from him, and her laughter sounded clear and buoyant.

"Master Echo, I touched you there; your sword was not quick enough. The old woman was too clever for you. You look at the stars and think all the while, 'Who is she? What is her age? Is she plain or comely?' And now—the bubble is pricked."

He was quick with his answer.

"By no means. You are young."

"Can you tell my age in the dark?"

"Madam, you smell of youth as the fields smell of hay."

She walked on in silence, looking up at the stars. He had spoken words that had touched the deeps in her, and discovered the real woman, the woman who held the secret heart of a king. She smiled. She felt a sudden gratitude towards this young man, a kindness that grew more confident.

"I will not quarrel with you for your obstinacy," she said; "perhaps I may bemoan it. And we are here."

A high yew hedge flanked the lane, and behind it rose a rolling mass of trees. A light gleamed somewhere, a light in an upper window. My lady paused where a high oak gate opened through an arch cut in the thickness of the yew hedge. She lifted the latch and pushed open the gate.

"Come."

He had thought to leave her there, and she had read his hesitation.

"It seems that you can obey; but were you forbidden to enter here?"

"No."

"Then have no fear. You shall read my age by candle-light. It is my pleasure to grant you that favour."

She led the way up a stone-flagged path to the house, and Fairfax knew that he was in her garden. On this still night he could smell the box that edged the path, the roses, the old-fashioned herbs with which the borders were planted. As for the house, it loomed up like a tall ship, a house of a hundred years ago, with its gables and high chimneys, its great beams and carved posts, its white plaster and carving, and the faint glimmer of its many lattices. The light of a candle showed behind one of the upper windows, but the rest of the house was in darkness.

My Lady had a key. She entered the timber porch with its oak benches, and opened the door, and within there was nothing but a great blackness.

"Wait here," she said, "until you see a light. You would only bark your shins against the furniture."

She disappeared into the darkness, and Fairfax heard her footsteps on the stone floor of the hall. A door opened and with it came a quick out-pouring of light, the light of a dozen candles burning in sconces on the walls of a room. Fairfax saw her enter the room and pass out of sight. In a moment she called to him.

Fairfax crossed the hall. There were no servants to be seen or heard, and yet the candles in the sconces had been lit less than half an hour. The room lay at the back of the house, a long room with a bay window at the far end looking out upon the garden and screened with curtains of black satin. The walls were covered with white tapestry traversed by a band of Tudor roses in gold. Near the window stood a virginal, and on the table in the centre of the room lay an Italian lute and a pile of books. There were flowers everywhere, in bowls upon the table and tall vases on the floor, roses, peonies, foxgloves, monk's-hood, white lilies. The air was sweet and heavy with the scent of them.

But this music-room, with all its richness, was but a setting for the figure of its mistress. She had taken off her cloak and mask and thrown them upon the table, and was looking into a little mirror that hung by one of the candle-sconces. She turned as Fairfax entered and stood regarding him with a faint, mysterious and provoking smile.

"Am I not very old?"

He did not answer her for a moment, for all his wits seemed to fly like moths round a candle. She was dressed in a gown of blood-red velvet, open at the throat and bosom, and caught lightly at the waist by a silver cord. The colour of the gown made more vivid the brilliant pallor of her face. Her hair was black, most intensely black, and falling in little curls over her ears and neck. Her face was a narrow oval, an intense face even in its beauty, with strong red lips, straight forehead, and finely arched brows. Her eyes were neither too large nor too small, and

they were the most compelling things in all the pride of her beauty, very dark yet very luminous, like some soft black fabric shot with light. Nor was her loveliness a mere beauty of the flesh ; it had that indefinable mystery that mere fleshly beauty lacks.

" Is Sir Echo silent ? "

His muteness flattered her, for the silence of some men is eloquent, nor was his face the face of a boor.

" Madam," he said, " perhaps Sir Echo would appear insolent were he to be honest. "

" You are more honest than insolent, John Fairfax, and yet—if you are ambitious you will have to learn to hide your honesty and parade your insolence. But how sententious we are for two old people ! You are six-and-twenty, perhaps, and I am two years older. Sit you down. "

She turned to the virginal, and seating herself on the stool before it, struck a few soft casual notes.

" One song before you go. I always sing at bed-time. It is good for the thoughts. "

She sang and he stood and listened. She had a glorious, sweet voice, a voice that seemed to sweep all the bitterness out of life and to make a man think of nothing that was not splendid and tender. It seemed a part of her physical beauty and of that other inward beauty that made her a woman whom it was good to love. And Fairfax, standing there in the candle-light with the scent of the flowers in his nostrils, felt all the doors of his soul opened and a voice singing that answered the voice that sang.

She ceased and turned to him with a seriousness begotten of her own music.

" Is that not better than a cup of heavy wine ? "

Fairfax bowed to her.

" Madam, I thank you. I would touch no wine if I could always hear you singing. "

She smiled slightly at some thought his words suggested.

" Already you are a courtier, Mr. Fairfax. Magic can tame wild beasts, they say, but I would rather help good men. And to do good it is sometimes necessary to appear evil. You do not understand that saying, perhaps ? "

She rose and he felt it behoved him to go. Her face

seemed to lose some of its brilliance ; a happy mood had passed ; the room had its shadows.

"Madam," he said, "I have pledged myself to ask no questions, yet I would know your name."

"You would not know it if you heard it," she answered him, "and it is possible——"

She gave a little shrug of the shoulders.

"I shall leave you to find it out. You may hear it to-morrow, the next day, or never. And now—good night."

She gave him her hand. He bent and kissed it, and turning, walked straight out of the house into the darkness of the garden. My lady had followed him to close the door. She heard his footsteps on the flagged path, the jarring of the gate as he shut it, and again the sound of his footsteps in the lane. He did not loiter or walk up and down outside her garden, and perhaps she was grateful to him for that.

"A man who might go far," she thought, "and yet a man who may be tripped up and thrown into the gutter by the first insolent young bully whom he meets. It is sad that so much should hang on a trick of the wrist."

She closed and locked the door, and after putting out the lights in the music-room, all save a candle in a silver stick, she went up the stairs to her chamber, moving slowly as though suddenly conscious of feeling tired. A French cabinet stood in one corner of her room. She went to it, pressed a spring, and took something out of a little secret drawer. It was a miniature, the portrait of a man with a lean, swarthy, enigmatic face, the face of the King.

She kissed it.

"Good night, my dear lord ; I kiss the man ; the world sees the mask."

Meanwhile, John Fairfax was losing himself in lanes and gardens, a moth whose flame had gone out, a man into whose soul the sudden, divine madness had entered. He was lost and knew himself lost, and the thought did not trouble him, nor had he any pity for Jeremy sitting yawning behind Mr. Honeyman's door. My lady's voice was still singing ; the colour and the mystery of her were still before his eyes, and when he smelt the smell of the hay lying in the fields it was the perfume of her clothes.

He walked into blind alleys, gardens, up paths that led nowhere, and once he discovered himself staring straight in the face of a farmyard wall.

"She is good; I will swear she is good!" The wall did not contradict him, though it was an old wall and should have been cynical. Yet, in due season, John Fairfax's solid sense took him by the sleeve, and pointed to the pole star. "Steer south, my friend," said Sound Sense, "it is time you were in bed. You cannot kick your heels all night in these lanes."

More by chance than through any exercise of judgment he arrived at the hamlet of St. Giles's in the Fields and met some merry soul who had been drinking in a tavern. Fairfax asked the way to Charing Cross. The merry soul embraced him, and then steadied himself with a loving hand on John's shoulder.

"The way t' make a wo-woman cross, dear. Why, marry her."

"It's Charing I want, Charing Cross."

"Y' want t' marry Charing Cross? But m' dear, you can't; it isn't done."

"I want to go to Charing Cross," said Fairfax with great gentleness.

"Oh—I see. You shspeak i' such—such a funny f-fashion, dear. Charing Cross is—is—down there—jus'—like that——"

He made a lurch in the direction from which he had come, and Fairfax thanked him, disentangled himself, and walked on. Presently he found himself in St. Martin's Lane, and half an hour later he was in bed.

CHAPTER V

SIR ROGER PAGAN had said of his man Purvis, "That he was the best servant within five miles of Westminster. He brought you the latest bit of news with the hot water in the morning, and no matter what the news was he never cut your chin." Moreover, he was so suave and debonair in the telling of it, no splutter, no haste, no straining after effect. He handed you the news on a salver just as he handed you a glass of wine or a letter.

"Another brawl, sir, and another gentleman killed in the street."

"Not our street, Purvis?"

"No, sir, in Hedge Lane, near the Cock Tavern; run through the body, sir. They say it was young Sir Richard Mortimer. Saints alive, I nearly cut you that time, sir!"

"My fault, Purvis; I jerked my chin. You say that it was Sir Richard Mortimer who was killed?"

"That is the report, sir."

"Who killed him?"

"No one seems to know that, sir. A drawer at The Cock found him lying in the road, and saw two men making off."

"What a damned sin!" said his master; "a very pleasant, honest boy, without an enemy in the world, so far as I knew."

"Allow me, sir."

Purvis dried Sir Roger's chin with a towel, and performed the act gently, as though he were powdering a lady's face.

"It has always been my experience, sir, that even pleasant and honest young gentlemen may commit indiscretions."

"Name them, Purvis."

"Falling in love, sir, with somebody else's wife. That seems to be the fashionable indiscretion, sir."

"Fie upon you, Purvis. This lad was a quiet lad."

"The quiet ones are the worst, sir, when the fit takes them."

"Zounds, man, would you debauch me in my old age! Hand me my old black doublet, and go and see to my breakfast."

Purvis went out smiling. He loved a gentleman with a fine air and a ready wit, and he loved no one better than his master. He could remember pulling him out of a tangle of dead horses and dead men at Long Marston. "Are you much hurt, sir?" "I have a boot full of blood, Purvis. I wish it were wine."

Sir Roger went to his breakfast with his head full of young Mortimer's murder, for in calling the thing murder he was honest with his own soul. A brawl, drawn swords, and a man killed in fair fight; that was how the casual world would speak of such an affair, with a shrug and a wink, and a question, "Who was the woman?" Pagan had his cynical moments, but he hated the world's easy conscience. He was a great gentleman, a man of honour, a shrewd observer of life; he believed in aristocracy and was no lover of mobs, rumps and conventicles, and his philosophy and his religion justified his prejudices. But he did not like this orgy of sword play. To Pagan the sword had always been the gallant's weapon, sheathed like a man's pride, tempered with a high-spirited restraint, never to be used save in some compelling crisis. Yet, to-day, the sword was becoming the weapon of the ambitious man and the bully. It was being used with a savage selfishness and a skilled ferocity that could be countered only by an equal skill in the man attacked. And your decent fellow is often a fool at his weapon. The black-guard wins.

Pagan was still at breakfast when Purvis entered with a letter.

"From Whitehall, sir. One of the King's servants brought it."

"Purvis, Purvis, paper, ink and a quill."

He found that his master had pushed the plates and dishes away from him, and that the letter lay spread upon the table. The reading of it appeared to have agitated

him, and he rose when Purvis entered, and picking up the letter, went and stood by the open window.

"The ink and paper, sir."

"Purvis, be ready to carry a letter to Mr. John Fairfax's lodging in the Strand. It must reach him at once, and it must not fail to reach him."

"It shall reach him, sir."

"And, Purvis, you will assist Mr. Fairfax to dress in a way befitting a courtier. You understand?"

"I understand, sir."

Sir Roger sat down at the table and wrote to his nephew, a very brief letter.

"Wait on me without delay, in your best clothes and wearing your Court manners. Purvis is at your service."

"PAGAN."

When Purvis had gone, Sir Roger called for a light, and closing the door, burnt that other letter, watching the frail ash of it shiver in the draught that played over the hearthstone. He was serious, troubled, perplexed. He went to his chamber, climbing the stairs slowly, and limping more than usual on that lame leg. A day of many decisions seemed before him, and as he put on his doublet of black velvet, and the clean ruffles and lace collar, he was attacked by one of those poignant memories, the memory of how he had dressed himself on the morning of the late king's death.

"God forgive me," he exclaimed, "but am I putting on my best clothes to walk with the boy to his funeral?"

He looked at himself in the mirror, and moved irresolutely about the room.

"Damn this ambition! Had he been content with the life of a plain gentleman of Surrey! But he has felt the spur in his flanks. I was the same."

He took his sword from the bed-post and fastened it on, and while his fingers were busy with the buckles a sudden thought made him smile.

"Why, to be sure, I'll try him downstairs, fly at his throat like an old fury. He may be quicker at the game than I think."

Sir Roger had been dressed less than half an hour, and was sitting at his window when he saw his nephew

walking up St. Martin's Lane, with Purvis at his heels. Fairfax had a presence. He carried his head well, and though he walked fast he seemed in no hurry. As for his clothes, they were quiet and rich, and not so rustic that a fashionable puppy would have the right to yap at him. Pagan was pleased.

"Come in, John."

He was standing when Fairfax entered; he had closed the lattices, and bade Fairfax shut the door, only to remember the ubiquitous Purvis.

"Purvis."

"Sir."

"Leave us alone. If you hear the clink of swords, it will mean nothing."

He threw up his head, laughed, and gave Fairfax a quick, fierce look.

"Draw, John! By gad, you are not quick enough!"

"What is the jest, sir?"

"Jest! It is no jest. Quick, or I shall touch you in the arm. These damned young gallants who come up from the country aren't fit to be trusted with a tooth-pick."

Pagan's sword was out. He swung a chair out of the way and advanced on Fairfax, his black eyebrows contracted, his mouth very grim. Fairfax drew, a little perplexed, half-smiling, watching the older man's fierce eyes.

"You have not been out in the sun, sir?"

"You have a pretty shoulder-knot. I used to be able to pick off a man's shoulder-knot, and then I knew that I could kill him."

"I might hit you, sir."

"I would to God you had the skill to do it, John. You puppy."

The swords had crossed, and they watched each other's eyes, Pagan trying the strength of the younger man's wrist. They began to play together, but there was no playfulness in Pagan's eyes; he was very careful, strangely quiet. It was he who made the passes, Fairfax who parried and who even in his passes showed the Englishman's natural impulse to cut rather than to thrust. They had been in play less than a minute when Pagan had the point of his sword through his nephew's shoulder-knot.

He drew back, turned, and threw his sword on the table almost with an air of disgust.

"What's to be done, John? I can't send you out naked into the world."

Fairfax was looking at his uncle's sword.

"I had no quarrel, sir."

"So you think that hot blood is all that is wanted. Have you not been to Falconer?"

"Yesterday."

"And did not the scoundrel tell you to keep your point for ever on the other man's body? The man with a levelled pike will always pink the windmill. On my honour, John, I know not what to do."

He picked up his sword, sheathed it, and limped up and down the room.

"You were a noted swordsman, sir."

"That's how I lifted my head high, John. I did not quarrel, but others knew that it was dangerous to quarrel with me. Why, my lad, there are dozens of young cocks who would put you under the soil if you trod on their toes. It would be nothing but sheep-killing—murder."

Fairfax's swarthy face flushed. He had come from his lodging, walking upon air, his head and heart full of last night's sudden, divine madness. And here was a man whom he respected calling him a poor sheep whose throat any bully could cut, and what was more he had used an argument that seemed to prove it.

"You appear very anxious on my account, sir. You sent Purvis for me in haste."

"Sulking will not help us, my lad. I am to take you to the King."

He turned sharply, and leaning forward a little looked Fairfax in the eyes.

"What happened to you last night?"

"Nothing that I may confess."

"Yet you had an audience of the King. He said so in a letter to me."

"If his Majesty has told you that, Uncle, I need not deny it."

"How did it happen?"

"In St. James's Park, somewhere about midnight.

But I cannot tell you more, sir, even though the adventure came to me by the strangest chance."

Pagan went close and laid a hand on Fairfax's shoulder.

"Answer me one question. You did not use your sword last night?"

Fairfax's surprised face answered him.

"No, I see you did not. And now, lad, I have orders to take you to the King; it seems that your chance has fallen to you out of the moon, and yet I like it not."

"You do not trust the King."

Pagan crossed himself.

"God forbid. I am one of the few who know what is in the King's heart. But have you no vision, John, of what the world of Whitehall is like? A world of fierce, ambitious, masterful young men watching each other with jealous eyes. A world of women who inflame the men. Why, let it but be known that the King has shown you some favour and there will be half a dozen courtly young cut-throats ready to pull your nose. Would you resent it?"

"Upon my honour, sir, do you think me a coward?"

He was angry, and with the anger of a man who was not easily ruffled. Pagan looked at him with his arch eyes, shrewdly smiling.

"No, you would resent it, and you would be taken to Leicester Fields or Hyde Park, and be run through the body. That is the situation. The question is—shall I take you to the King, and let you loose upon some fatal adventure?"

Fairfax walked to the window and stood there with his back to the room.

"The question can be answered, sir, in only one way. Can I hesitate after what you have said? I answer it by going to Whitehall."

Pagan's face softened.

"John, God knows, I had no wish to hurt your pride, and yet, look you, I had to speak to a man of my own blood before I wished him God-speed on such an adventure. Why not wait a month? I'll see that wrist of yours learns its cunning."

"And what would you tell the King?"

"The truth, John. There is nothing like the truth."

"That I am a booby, a bumpkin, not fit to be let out alone! No, by my soul, sir, I cannot stomach that."

He turned, took a step forward, and the two men looked steadily at each other.

"So be it, John. Let us walk down to Whitehall arm in arm."

The King had breakfasted and had held his levée, and was walking in the Privy Garden, with a great number of lords and gentlemen in attendance. A gentleman usher, Bates by name, was waiting near the main gate. He was there with a purpose, and when Pagan and his nephew passed in, he walked forward to meet them and bowed to Sir Roger.

"Will you follow me, Sir Roger?"

"Mr. Bates, this is my nephew, Mr. Fairfax. We are expected?"

"I was told to await your arrival. His Majesty is in the garden. It is his wish that you wait in the Stone Gallery."

Bates led them to the gallery and left them there, and standing at the great central window, Pagan and John Fairfax could look down into the Privy Garden with its formal grass-plots, borders and gravelled paths. Charles was standing by the sun-dial talking to a heavy man in a sky-blue coat, a man with the stupid and solemn face of an ox. The gentlemen of the Court strolled up and down the paths, or stood watching the King. The Court was in a satirical mood. The red-faced man in blue was sitting heavily on his own good fortune.

Fairfax saw a gentleman with an insolent, hard face, very exquisitely dressed in yellow satin, walk slowly towards the sun-dial. He held a spaniel pup in the hollow of an arm, and putting the pup down on the path behind the blue man's back, he incited the little beast against the swollen magnificence of a pair of white silk stockings. The pup fell to the game. The blue man was wearing an enormous pair of blue petticoat breeches with bunches of cerise-coloured ribbons at the knees, and these ribbons inflamed the pup's spirit of adventure. He began to dance and yap behind the blue man's legs.

Pagan smiled.

"His Majesty is bored. That piece of insolence will be overlooked."

The blue man had turned with a glare of the eyes, glanced at the spaniel, and from the spaniel to the man in yellow. The King's face remained a good-humoured mask, even when the pup made a jump at the ribbons, pulled a streamer loose and began to tug and to worry, emitting infantile growls.

"Who is that other fellow?"

"Which one, John?"

"The one in yellow."

"Theophilus Egmond Hargreaves, commonly called Teg. A young devil. Hallo, the marquis is beaten."

The whole garden was laughing, not loudly, but with an exquisite discretion that made its laughter more merciless. Fairfax saw the big man bow with a face of flame, and move slowly away with the puppy still worrying at his legs. He passed Teg Hargreaves, and as he passed him Fairfax saw the big man's eyes fall as though he accepted some insult which he dared not challenge. He walked on and mixed with the crowd. To Fairfax the incident seemed humiliating and ugly.

"One may not strike a man in Whitehall," he said.

"You might lose your hand, John."

"But that was a blow, though it was not given with the hand. And he dared not resent it."

Pagan's eyes narrowed.

"He prefers to live."

"You mean, sir——?"

"Leicester Fields, as I told you. Hargreaves would have killed him. He stings like a wasp. He has ambition, John; all those young men down yonder are like dogs round a table; but there are some dogs whom the others dare not quarrel with. Hallo, the King is leaving the garden."

When Charles appeared in the Stone Gallery he was followed by two or three of the most intimate of his gentlemen, men who were neither politicians, courtiers, nor servants, but friends of the King. Pagan was known to them all, and in a sense he was one of them. Charles's face lit up at the sight of Pagan and his nephew. He had looked self-absorbed, discovered in a moment of naturalness after

a morning spent with the eyes of a hundred eager men watching him.

"Good morning, gentlemen."

They bowed to him, and Fairfax met the King's eyes. They smiled and yet did not smile, yet the look in them made Fairfax feel that Charles counted him as a man.

"This is John Fairfax?"

"It is, sir."

"Master John, no man could have a better sponsor. Is the country so dull?"

Fairfax saw in an instant that he was to know nothing of the night's adventure or of the King's letter to his uncle.

"It was not the dullness of the country, your Majesty, but the lure of Whitehall."

"Pagan, he is already pat at the game. Bring him with you."

He dismissed the others, and smiling at old Pagan, walked slowly towards his private apartments, loitering a moment to suffer Sir Roger to join him. Fairfax followed a few paces behind. He noticed that one of the gentlemen who had been dismissed glanced round as he left the gallery, sending towards him a stare of criticism and curiosity. The King and Pagan had entered a long passage with a great window full of painted glass at the end thereof. A page was sitting in the passage, and to him Charles spoke sharply:

"Basset, to the door."

They entered an ante-room. The King paused here, put off his hat and his sword, and looked archly at Pagan.

"I have something to say to your nephew. Bid him wait in the next room."

Charles passed on and Sir Roger moved back to the outer door and held Fairfax's arm.

"Go into the next room, John, and wait. Close the door after you."

Fairfax obeyed him.

The second room opened on the King's closet, the door of which hung open. A carved screen stood inside the door, and through the tracing of the panels Fairfax saw a table covered with papers, and behind it a chair. Charles seated himself in the chair. He rested his elbows on the

table, and covered his face for a moment with his hands, and when he withdrew his hands his face looked tired and drawn. He sat for a while and stared at the papers on the table, but not as though he saw them. He seemed to be looking at something that was a long way off. Presently his right hand went into his bosom. He drew out some object hidden in the hollow of his hand, with a loop of black ribbon hanging from it. Charles looked fixedly at the object in his hand, and Fairfax imagined that it was a miniature, perhaps the portrait of some lady. It was a miniature, but not of a woman. Charles was looking at the face of his father, Charles I., the king whom the great city of London had helped to kill.

He put the miniature away, and Fairfax, a little troubled at being allowed to watch so intimately the private moments of the King, had turned himself so that he could not look into the closet. It had seemed to be like spying, gazing at a man while he was at his prayers, and yet it was obvious that Charles knew that he could be seen from the outer room. A king becomes accustomed to living his life in public, and yet Fairfax was not so unsubtle that he did not conceive himself flattered by being received into Charles's moments of solitude.

"John."²²

"Your Majesty?"

"A word with you."²³

Fairfax bowed as he entered the closet, and stood waiting, his eyes on the King. Charles's face looked strangely refreshed; its rather harsh lines had softened.

"Sit down, John. So you have come up from the country to try your fortune here? It is my pleasure that you shall serve as one of the Grooms of my Privy Chamber."

Fairfax was still standing.

"Your Majesty is very generous."

He saw the King's face as he had never seen it before. It seemed to grow very pale with the intensity of some inward passion, a passion that was an inspiration and a faith. Its lines were as harsh and as strong and as uncompromising as the lines on the face of Cromwell.

"I put no light burden upon you, John Fairfax. What were the words I spoke to you last night?"

"Your Majesty spoke of obedience. How a man should see everything and nothing, hear and be deaf, ask no questions and expect no answers."

"Does that seem hard to you?"

"No harder than for a sailor on a ship, sir, where each man obeys the master's orders."

"You must have faith in the ship's master, John, who sails under sealed orders. What if I am a Papist, a tyrant, a libertine—all that the City fathers and the godly tradesmen loathe?"

He leant back in the chair and watched Fairfax's face.

"Is there any worse tyrant, sir, than a fanatical grocer?"

"By God, John, you have hit the mark! Who taught you that?"

"Thinking upon things in the country, your Majesty."

"I tell you, John, this country is not yet fit to be free. How many citizens are there who have learnt the real humility, the goodness that says: 'Friend, seek God, as seems best to you'? No; the cry is, 'Seek God, you scoundrel, in my way, or you shall not seek Him at all.' Pride, John, pride, the arrogance of the grocer. This country shall have its purge. This masterful, wrangling, insolent city shall be sick to the point of death, and even then it will abuse the hands of the one who has purged it. . . . Enough. Where do you lodge?"

"In the Strand, your Majesty."

"It is my wish that you remain in your lodging, and attend me here when I so desire it. And now, John, have you the courage to serve?"

"Try me, sir. I obeyed you last night."

Charles smiled.

"Often, John, you will walk in the dark, and your heart may misgive you. Take this letter——" He drew a sealed letter from under his silk shirt and handed it to Fairfax.

"You will go and walk with your uncle in the park. In the park you will see a coach, and a lady standing by it. You will give her this letter."

"The same lady, your Majesty?"

"The same."

CHAPTER VI

FAIRFAX could well have spared himself his uncle's company in the park, but that there was some reason for it passed without question. Pagan had spent a few minutes with the King while Fairfax waited in the ante-chamber, and when he came out from the closet he was frowning.

They left the palace by the passage leading to Whitehall Stairs, Pagan answering John's questioning look with words that showed his understanding of the affair.

"It is a roundabout way to the park. There are times when a roundabout way is quicker."

They took a boat, were rowed to York Stairs, and in returning towards the park Fairfax came by an understanding of his uncle's shrewdness. Pagan was so well known at Whitehall and in such good favour with the King that they would have been hindered at every corner by some polite and enterprising gentleman who had a tongue to use in his own service. Moreover, the palace was full of eyes that watched for the most trifling incident connected with the inner life of the King. A little, ambitious world exercised itself in watching feathers blowing on the surface of the Royal pond.

They had entered the park when Sir Roger gave John one of his arch, smiling looks.

"You know whom to seek?"

"I do not know her name."

"Nor I. That may be remedied."

Fairfax was still dominated by the intense and purposeful seriousness of Charles's swarthy face. He had been surprised by it; rumour would have presented him to a gay and pleasant fool, and in place of the fool he had discovered a man who appeared to have a purpose and a philosophy. He spoke of it to Pagan.

"Does the King wear a mask?"

His uncle took him by the arm.

"Not so fast. We meander, we do not flow. And do not use that particular word too freely; say rather, 'our friend.'"

"I take you, sir. But what of my question?"

"If you have seen our friend without his mask, then you have been granted a very rare privilege. There is more behind it than the world wots of, and I can tell you, John, there are times when it troubles me."

"In what way?"

"I may not tell you. I have served my apprenticeship to the House of Stuart, and I will continue to serve that house until I die. I too have bloody memories—memories that these city fools think can be wiped out with a few bonfires and some small beer. You have your apprenticeship to serve."

"That's true, sir. I'll ask you no questions."

Charles had given Fairfax no hint as to where he might meet with my Lady and her coach, but Sir Roger Pagan was less innocent. He walked in the direction of one of the avenues, a green ride that was full of the pride and the colour of the morning. Here were coaches, sedan-chairs, gentlemen on horseback and gentlemen a-foot, half a squadron of the Guards riding slowly by on their black horses, gentlewomen with great Portuguese fans and roses in their hair, the world of fashion and of perfume, of wit and of intrigue. Fairfax noticed that his uncle seemed to grow taller and to walk with a certain conscious stateliness. His eyes had a gleam in them. He had the air of a great gentleman going forward to meet a world of enemies.

"You will recognize the lady, John?"

"Otherwise—I should be blind."

"Ha, it is like that! One moment, lad; when you see her, touch my elbow with yours, to warn me."

They were approaching the avenue when Fairfax noticed a black coach with red wheels that had drawn out on to the grass clear of the trees. A woman had pulled aside the leather curtain and descended from the coach, and already quite a little crowd of gentlemen had gathered round her. In her blood-red dress she looked like some

splendid flower in the centre of a posy, standing quite still while all these gallants made a circle of homage about her.

Fairfax quivered like a dog, and the blood rose to his neck and ears.

"To the right, sir."

He was in doubt for a moment, but as they drew nearer to the coach he was overwhelmed by the recognition of her, her brilliant pallor and her midnight hair. And suddenly he was afraid. His knees were like wax, his mouth felt dry, so dry that he moistened his lips with his tongue. He forgot to nudge old Pagan with his elbow; he forgot his uncle's presence until he heard him speaking, and speaking in a quick, fierce voice that sounded very small and strange.

"John, stay here."

Fairfax swung round, looking at Pagan with big, curious eyes.

"Is that the woman?"

"Yes."

"Good God! Barbara Rackstraw! Give me that letter."

He had caught Fairfax by the sleeve and held him.

"Give me the letter. It is better that I should deliver it."

Fairfax looked into his uncle's eyes. For the moment he did not understand the reason of old Pagan's excitement. Both men were profoundly moved, Fairfax by the sudden atmosphere of sinister mistrust that Pagan had created, Sir Roger by the possible tragedy that this woman's name suggested.

"That letter was given me by the King."

Pagan still held him by the sleeve.

"It is for your own sake, lad, that I ask you to humour me in this."

Fairfax was obstinate, sullen.

"Give me a reason, sir."

"I cannot, John."

"Is your quarrel with my courage or the lady's name?"

"With neither."

"She has seen us."

"Let me lead in this, man."

But Fairfax had met my lady's eyes, and the hot youth in him would not be held back. He walked forward towards the group beside the coach, and Pagan, in danger of being left derelict, limped quickly after him. My lady had seen more of the by-play than Fairfax imagined, and her dark eyes were watching old Pagan's face as though some message were to be read there.

She smiled and took two steps forward, the group about her undulating and breaking like a smoke-ring. Heads were turned to discover the man at whom Barbara Rackstraw smiled.

"Sir Roger, I had begun to think that we had quarrelled."

He gave her one quick look before he swept off his hat and bowed over her hand.

"I hope that is impossible."

She touched his shoulder gently with her great crimson fan.

"I echo the thought."

Her eyes seemed full of sudden laughter. She looked from Sir Roger to his nephew, and looked at him questioningly, as at a stranger. Pagan seized the chance she offered him, and seized it with the swiftness of a man grown cunning in the interplay of wits. From that moment he and Barbara Rackstraw understood each other, and if they crossed swords, each recognized the chivalry of the other.

"This is my nephew, John Fairfax. May I present him to you?"

"Why, to be sure."

She smiled at John, who had been standing there in a most human and unreasonable rage, feeling like a small boy held to the bands of a pedagogue, and a very masterful and courtly pedagogue who had more in that old head of his than was good for a young man's jealousy. He had sensed some quick understanding between my lady and his uncle. Pagan had got between him and the sun.

"And how do you like London, Mr. Fairfax?"

He had bowed to her, a little flushed, a man who had no mind to be kept in the background. Her casual question

stung him. She might have been asking a boy how he liked being at school.

"I prefer Paris," he said bluntly.

She looked at him with an air of surprise and of slight hauteur.

"I see that you are full of your travels. I have a certain preference for Timbuctoo, Mr. Fairfax."

Someone laughed; but Fairfax did not look at the laughter. His anger flared suddenly against himself; he had trodden most clumsily upon his own toes, betrayed an absurd petulance, and she had cuffed him as one cuffs a puppy. He caught the quizzical glance of a man who stood opposite him.

"Mr. Rusticus had better look to his breeches."

"Ask him his opinion of Jericho, Tom."

My lady had laid a sudden hand on Sir Pagan's arm.

"Come. I have something to ask you. Bring your nephew; he seems a downright young man, and ready to give an opinion."

She smiled round meaningly at her little court, a smile that dismissed them, but there was one man who did not take his dismissal lightly. He wore yellow satin and carried a spaniel puppy in the hollow of his arm, and it was he who had laughed at Fairfax's snubbing.

"Princess, my puppy has not yet been presented. He, too, is from the country."

Pagan turned on him with the flash of an old eagle.

"Do you ask me, Mr. Hargreaves, to give place to your puppy?"

He was so fierce, so towering, so much the great gentleman that Teg Hargreaves stood back from the offence.

"I withdraw the joke, Sir Roger Pagan, if you take it to yourself."

"That is well, sir. I may be an old dog, but even young dogs take no liberties with me."

He sailed away with Barbara Rackstraw on his arm, leaving Fairfax to follow them, a Fairfax who realized that the older man had swept in and challenged an insult that had been aimed at his own head. There was humiliation in the thought. Was he so vulnerable a thing that an old man's arm had to be stretched out to defend him?

John's teeth were on edge. He was out of his depth and no passionate splashing would help him if he could not swim.

Sir Roger and the lady walked for some hundred paces across the grass before they chose to remember that Fairfax was behind them. Barbara Rackstraw turned her head and spoke over her shoulder :

"It is rash to be rude, and rude to be rash," she said, "O Master Square-Toes."

"I ask your pardon, madam."

His humiliation betrayed itself in his voice. She seemed to relent, and withdrawing her arm from Sir Roger Pagan's, turned to him with a serious gentleness that completed his humiliation.

"You have a letter for me, John."

"I have."

"Last night I thought you quick in the heart and the head. To-day, it seems, you would have pushed in among those men and brought upon me so damnable and difficult a moment that even the most brazen of women——"

"Madam, I assure you, I should have been no such fool."

He met Sir Roger's arch eyes and softened to the sudden smile in them.

"I lost my temper. I admit it."

"And I lost it for him, dear lady. John's courage blushes easily, and is hot in the head. I was the same in my day."

Barbara Rackstraw looked at them both.

"Oh, you men! How difficult you make life for us. But it seems that Mr. John has recovered his temper. I shall walk a little way with him and my coach can follow me."

Pagan made her a very fine bow.

"Permit me to give the order to your coachman. I think I may trust John to you."

"And me to him?"

"You are as good a judge as I am."

She gathered the fullness of her red skirts in one hand, spread her fan, and turned in the direction of St. James's, shaping a path across the grass so as to strike the road at

some little distance from the crowded avenue. Pagan was standing like a sentinel, waiting to see whether Teg Hargreaves or any other gallants had planned to follow her. A figure in yellow showed under one of the trees. Pagan walked back to the coach, pointed out my lady to the coachman, gave him her orders, and entered the coach.

"That will puzzle Mr. Hargreaves a little."

He held one of the leather curtains aside, and looked for a moment at the yellow figure under the shade of the tree.

Mrs. Rackstraw and Fairfax were walking side by side. She had spread her fan against the sun, and since John was on the sunward side of her he could not see her face. The sweet smell of her clothes reached him, and he heard the rustling of her silks, a sound that sent such a tremor through his June madness that for the moment he could not speak. The mystery of her enveloped him. He looked at the hand that held the fan, and saw its blue veins and sparkling rings. He was still shaken by an inward fury begotten of the conviction that he had behaved before her with the rude futility of a fool.

"You have that letter?"

"Yes."

"Keep it till we are in my coach."

He wanted to bend his head and kiss her hand.

"Am I forgiven? I am to be allowed to drive with you?"

She walked on in silence. The face behind the fan was troubled, unhappy.

"I am frightened, John," she said.

"Of what?"

"A man was killed last night, the man who should have been waiting under that tree."

"Well, what of it?"

"You have taken his place, John."

He betrayed no surprise and no fear, but he was beginning to be exasperated by this solicitude that looked at him anxiously as though he were a sickly child. Was he so absolutely incapable of standing on the pride of his own manhood? He was in love, and love carries its head high and will be pitied of none. And here was the woman who

had overwhelmed him, as vapourish and troubled as though she were his maiden aunt, and he some little schoolboy who would blubber if the butcher made a face at him.

"Madam, I shall lose my temper."

She dropped her fan and looked at him with grave steadfastness.

"You had better lose it, John, for good and all, and never find it again."

"Madam, if either you or my uncle cannot cease from treating me like a thing in swaddling clothes——"

"What will you do, John?"

"Get killed to spite you both. You seem to think that I am made of glass."

"And so you are," she said; "but be not angry with me for having a soft heart. You fly higher than you know; there are other hawks in the sky."

"And, by God! I'm no heron."

They had reached the road, and heard the coach rumbling behind them. Barbara Rackstraw paused and looked back.

"If you are so quarrelsome, John, I shall order you to take that letter back to the man who gave it you. Yes, I am in earnest."

He bit his lip.

"What do you wish me to do?"

"To think a little more of my danger, and a little less of your courage."

She saw him flush to the eyes.

"I beg your pardon; you are right, and I am wrong."

The coach overtook them, and Pagan, stepping out, gave Mrs. Rackstraw his hand. She did not appear surprised to find that he had followed them, and Fairfax had been so chastened by her frankness that he forgot to think of his uncle as the pedagogue.

"In with you, John."

He had handed my lady into her coach, and was looking back to see if they were watched or followed.

"The way is clear."

She gave Pagan her hand, and he bent and kissed it; and, looking in her eyes a moment, bowed and withdrew.

Barbara Rackstraw had told Fairfax to pull the leather

curtains across the windows. She lay back in her corner and seemed to forget him for the moment, but the brilliant pallor of her beauty and the smell of her clothes seemed more mysterious and more potent in the dim interior of the coach. Fairfax sat stiffly beside her, his knees pressed close together so that they should not tremble. Lying under the beeches in Shere Park he had read his Shakespeare and his Marlowe in the green cool of the evening, with the deer wading through the bracken and the cows standing in the deep grass of the meadows by the river. He had read in the book of the great madness that may overtake a man between dawn and dusk, and he had read it calmly, not sensing the thing as a wild fever of the blood. But now those divine and exultant words bit into him like words of fire. The thing had happened to him, without reason, in the simple course of a day and a night. The storm was so strong in him that he could hardly keep from trembling.

“The letter.”

He fumbled for it, drew the letter from under his shirt, and, giving it to her, looked at the hand that took it and not into her face. She seemed quite unaware of him and of the great fire that she had kindled. He saw her slip the letter into her bosom, and sit with her hand pressed over it, and in that one instant he understood. The gesture overwhelmed him; that hand of hers that seemed to press exultantly and with a rapture of tenderness upon the lips of some dear wound.

Fairfax sat rigid, staring. His brain seemed a fog of fire, and he could not think. His face was as pale as his shirt. He had a horror of her speaking to him, for his lips and his tongue felt palsied.

Looking through the slit between the leather curtain and the panelling he could see that the coach had drawn into a country road. It stopped, and Fairfax heard the coachman shouting to a carter:

“Hi, move yer waggon! I’m comin’ into that lane.”

Fairfax pulled back the curtain.

“I will leave you to read the letter,” he said; and, slipping out, rushed off as though he had stabbed her and thought only of escape.

CHAPTER VII

FAIRFAX did not look back. He swung along with his head bent, as though the month were December, and he a wanderer on the downs with a north wind blowing the rain into his face. His youth raged in him, the rage of the proud young animal who feels its first wound, and is enraged by the sight of its own blood. He did not try to reason the thing out, for as yet he had no living sense of the humour and the pathos of life. Youth goes at a gallop, waving its fiery cross, rousing the clans, thinking of nothing but broadswords and battle.

Laughter comes afterwards, if it comes at all, but it did not come to John Fairfax in the fever of that first adventure. His fool-passion had flown leagues ahead of his cooler wits, and when the tumble came there was no reasonable soul to pick up the pieces. His head and his heart were full of Barbara Rackstraw's beauty, and of his sudden self-created dream of her, a dream that had been broken in pieces by that fatal letter. Her glorious voice had sung him suddenly into heaven. He had not paused to think or to ask himself questions, and when the truth was shown to him he supposed himself to be in hell.

Had Sir Roger Pagan been a coarse man he would have roared with laughter when John Fairfax burst like a thunder-cloud in his garden. Sir Roger had dined, and was sitting under a lime tree at the end of the bowling-green. Fairfax had left Purvis in the hall. He came across the grass with the stiff white face of youth in the fury of its first love-rage, youth that is merciless to itself and to others.

"Have you dined, John?"

"On other meat, sir, and it has sent me home sick as a dog."

He walked up and down in front of his uncle's chair.

"A glass of wine?"

"No, thank you."

And then he drew up in front of old Pagan, confronting him like an accuser, as though he were part of the conspiracy, an arch-cynic in a world of make-believe.

"Is she the King's mistress?"

"What business is it of ours, John?"

"You cannot say that she is not. And I thought her a saint, not a harlot."

Old Pagan straightened in his chair. The delicate and gentle cynicism of the philosopher was no weapon with which to meet this crazy cub.

"That is a foul word. What right have you to use it in speaking of her?"

He was angry.

"What are you, lad, to come blundering in like a drunken man, throwing wild words in the air?"

"Yes, what am I?"

"The King's servant."

"No, by God! I am his fool, and the fool of this woman, a booby chosen to be the King's stalking-horse."

Pagan stood up. He seemed to hang like a hawk over Fairfax, even as he had turned on Teg Hargreaves in the park, fierce, splendid, the bright blade of his anger in his eyes.

"You fool, John! No, not a word. Stand there and listen. You come up from the country, green and plump with the juice of your greenness, your head full of fine poetical sap, ready to play the Sir Percival in the Strand. You ask for adventures, and when your adventure comes to you it goes to your head and your loins like Spanish wine. Get back to the country and grow lettuces."

"I may be green, sir, but no man of straw."

"Who asked you to fall in love with the lady? Did she?"

"No."

"What is it to you if the King loves her and she loves the King? Upon my soul, John, I was hot of heart in my youth, but not so serious I hope, not so damnably and egregiously serious. You go head over heels into the love-pond without any woman asking you to do it, and

when you discover that the ground is another man's bathing-pool, you climb out in a righteous and disgusting rage and scream that the water is muddy."

"So it is, sir, unclean."

Pagan gave a toss of the head.

"How do you know?"

"His Majesty is married."

"You pedant, John, you prude, you ague-cheek of a Christian! Save me from the hard young man whose knowledge comes from books."

And then he smiled, brushed a crumb from his coat, and sat down in his chair. The blue glare went out of his eyes. His serenity returned, the serenity of the cynic.

"Well, you will play the man of honour and keep this secret?"

"Am I a teller of tales?"

"John, John, this righteousness of yours will be your undoing. You have no smiles. You fall in love like a drunken schoolboy. You have called a very wonderful woman the foulest of names. Go round to your lodging, pack your baggage, and take horse for Shere. I have no use for you. What is more, I have too great a respect for the lady, and too much love for the King."

"I think your advice is excellent, sir."

"Then take it."

"Rather than be the go-between—the letter carrier——"
His uncle's fierceness returned.

"Am I to have all the sententious froth blown at me again? Get out, man, get out. Go for a voyage to the Indies, go and fight the Dutch, go and argue with the parson, but spare us that self-righteousness."

"If I am something of a Puritan, sir——"

"You are not, John, you are a fool. Tell Purvis to bring me a pipe."

Fairfax walked off with his head in the air, his skin tingling, feeling that life was an outrage, a thing of whips.

"Prig, you unconscionable prig!" said his uncle, watching his uncompromising back. "I did not want to hurt thee, lad, yet, if it was possible, she would hurt thee more."

Fairfax crossed the bowling-green, but Pagan saw him

pause between the two white classic pillars of the garden porch. He stood there for half a minute, irresolute, his right arm round one of the pillars, the soft brim of his hat curled against it. His face had lost the fanatical harshness of youth, for a man's mood may suddenly be softened by some trick of the senses playing upon a memory that is charged with a more than transient tenderness. The grass on the bowling-green had been scythed that morning, and the gardener had raked the mowings into a cock beside the French roses near the garden door. The sweet smell of it, drawn out by the hot sun, had drifted into Fairfax's nostrils, and made him think of that walk through the dark lanes and the smell of the hay lying out in the fields. A revulsion of feeling passed through him. His love-rage and the selfish iconoclasm of a young man's passion were cooled and rebuked by that midnight memory. He seemed to see the stars, to smell the sweet smell of his lady's clothes, to hear her glorious voice singing him into paradise.

He bit the sleeve of his coat.

"It is I who am mad."

He faced about and walked slowly back across the grass. Pagan watched him, and yet did not appear to watch. When a young man's heart is moved and he turns back in the face of his own pride, the eyes of an old man grow gentle.

"What is the truth, sir?"

He stood looking at the ground.

"Have you come back to ask me for the truth, John?"

"A little while ago I used a foul word. And now I would give much to know that I had spoken like a fool."

"I called you a fool, if you remember. You spoke like a fool."

He looked up quickly at Pagan.

"Then—she is not?"

"She is not what you called her, John. You fell in love with her, as a boy should fall in love, as I would fall in love, now, if I were younger. If the King loves her, can you quarrel with the King? If she is brave, for the sake of the man who loves her, can you quarrel with that? You and the world may have called her a——"

But Fairfax's right hand went up.

"Not that damned word! . . . You should have struck me in the mouth. I'll go into the country, sir."

"What, to Shere?"

"No, to where her garden is. She shall tell me the truth with her own lips."

"But—good heavens, boy!"

He looked at Fairfax's face, and saw the face of a man who was inspired.

"If I tell her that I love her, she will tell me the truth. If she is—what in that first hour I thought her to be—she will tell me the truth."

"Well, upon my soul?" said his uncle. "A man is sometimes wisest when love leads him by the nose."

CHAPTER VIII

FAIRFAX carried through all the years that were to come a very vivid memory of that pilgrimage of his. There are days that become an emotional part of a man's soul. They are like a golden evening after rain, with all the earth wet and fragrant and a little cold, suffused with the strange soft sadness of the green land, a sense of some beautiful thing lacked and never utterly enjoyed, the eternal tears behind the smile. The hedgerows were very still. Mowers were at work in the fields; Fairfax heard the sound of their voices, and the ring of the scythes when the whetstones were flicked along the blades. The slanting sunlight made the pink campion and the sorrel under the hedges shine like little flames. He saw a hare go loping across a lane, two sparrows taking a dust-bath, a lark trilling and hovering over a field where no mowers were at work. Not a leaf moved on the trees. The great elms threw their shadows far into the fields, and seemed to drink the blue of the sky.

Fairfax wandered for three hours. The fever had left him; he felt tranquil, a man who drifted through some inevitable dream, though whether it was tragedy or comedy he could not tell. He did not vex himself over what he would do and say; the words were there on his lips; some other voice than his own seemed waiting to speak them.

He had nothing but his sense of direction to guide him, and yet he worked patiently through this web of roads and lanes, not wishing to tear the heart out of the adventure, knowing that he would find the place he sought. Here and there he saw a house that he seemed to remember, some lane whose windings were familiar. The bells of London sounded very far away, like the bells of ships at sea. The sun was low in the west when he found himself

in a lane that skirted the edge of a park, a park whose palings were broken or rotting in the grass. Here were many noble trees—oaks, beeches, chestnuts, old thorns—and yet the place had the look of a wilderness. It was the park of Marybone that had been overrun during the wars, its fences broken, and much of its timber cut.

He came quite suddenly upon the green line of a yew hedge, and above it the twisted chimneys and gables of Barbara Rackstraw's house half hidden among trees. Walking along the lane he found the arch cut in the hedge, the oak gate, the paved path running between the flower borders. Fairfax stood at the gate and looked at the house. One of the upper casements hung open, and a green curtain swayed gently to and fro. He noticed the grotesque beauty of the carving on the brackets, beam-ends and barge-boards. The porch was full of black shadow, and so dark that he could not see the door. A great slant of sunlight striking through between the corner of the house and a mulberry tree fell upon the flower borders on either side of the path, and made of them two broad ribbons of flame. The place was very silent. Fairfax could hear no voices.

He walked back along the yew hedge, and pushing through under the branches of some thorns found himself in the park. The garden was surrounded by a sweep of wild grass-land and bracken. It was fenced and screened with a tangle of shrubs and trees, but at one point a tree had been felled, and a gap left in the bank of leaves. It gave Fairfax a glimpse into that part of the garden that lay at the back of the house. He saw a lawn with the grass rather long on it, a sundial, the shimmer of a window.

He had his hands on the rail of the fence when someone began to play on the virginal that stood in the big window of the music-room. Fairfax did not move. He knew whose fingers were touching the notes, and the little thin sweetness of the melody was as plaintive as the song of a bird. He stood there, expectant, trembling, so that the fence shook under his hands. In a moment he would hear her voice, that voice that was as disastrous and wonderful as the face that wrecked Troy.

And then he heard her singing. He could not hear

the words of the song, nor did the words matter. Her voice seemed to go down into the great deeps of life, and up to the stars that were waiting to shine. There was exultation in it, a sound of things yearned for yet never attained, a sadness that reached out into the spaces of a great loneliness. It seemed to sing of all the heart lacked, all that it would always lack in this land of greenness and of grey skies.

Fairfax climbed the fence. Youth is made for the climbing of fences, and John broke into my lady's garden with the serene recklessness of a fanatic. He pushed through to the lawn, and stood there in the shade of the trees. Two of the lattices of the great window were open, and Fairfax could see her sitting at the virginal, her red dress and her white arms and hands splashed by the light of the setting sun. Her face and throat were in the shadow. She seemed in a desultory mood, and for a long while she would sit there without touching the notes, her hands on her knees, her head drooping a little. More than once she looked towards the garden, but the soft glare of the sunset was in her eyes, and Fairfax stood in the shadow.

The sun went down ; bats flitted against the afterglow ; the blue of the sky deepened, and the green of the trees and of the grass was changing to black. The sweet thin notes of the virginal sounded again, but Barbara Rackstraw did not sing. She sat and touched the notes of the virginal while the stars looked out, and the dew began to fall on the grass, and the long room grew full of the dusk.

Suddenly her hands faltered and paused with the fingers resting on the keyboard. She listened, as though conscious of someone near her. She turned her head towards the window, her body remaining motionless, her hands still on the keyboard. A man was standing close to the window.

There was still light enough for her to see his face—a young man's face, very white and yet very sombre. He looked in at her with that inspired calmness that is sometimes seen in the faces of men about to die. She did not move, nor was she afraid. She had been thinking of him a moment ago, and somehow it seemed very natural that he should be standing there.

“ So you have come back, John ? ”

"I had to come back," he said.

She withdrew her hands from the notes, and turned her stool towards the window. He gazed at her all the while with the steadfastness of a man who hardly remembered to be self-conscious in looking at the woman whom he loved.

"You went away in a great hurry."

"I had given you the letter. There was nothing more required of me but to go away."

"It was because of the letter. I understand."

She leant her elbows on the broad sill of the window.

"So you could kill me, John?"

"Almost—I could have killed you."

He was most extraordinarily calm now, nor did it surprise him that all his passion was like an open book to her. He was there to be read, and to read. There are times when a man's soul is naked.

"Yet you have come back. Why?"

"Because I wanted the truth."

"What right have you to ask for it?"

"Because I was in the dark—in hell."

She looked up at him with a candour that equalled his.

"What made you love me, John, all in three minutes?"

"It happened. That's all."

"No compliments, no reasons, no pretty speeches! Not my eyes, nor my hair, nor my voice! Oh, you strange man!"

"It is you, the whole of you. It has never happened to me like this before."

She was moved, more moved than he imagined, for her serenity had been a mask that was not often discarded. There was no insolence in the audacity of his frankness. The greatest of all things had happened to him; he would kill or be killed, put his hand into the flame, walk open-eyed to death.

She covered her face with her hands.

"Oh—I am sorry."

"You have no cause to be sorry."

"John, do you know how lonely I am? Let us talk as though we were children. Do you think that I have beauty?"

"Such as I never dreamed of."

"I will tell you a secret. A woman who is cursed with beauty has no friends. You men are all alike. We are hunted by you, and you have no pity; you would tear us in pieces between you, and other women hate us because we make you mad. So you have come to hate me, John, to point that love of yours at me like a pistol——"

"God forbid!"

"Then why have you come?"

"To ask you a question."

"Ask it."

He stood with head up, his eyes like the eyes of a man at the stake.

"Do you love the King?"

She uncovered her face to him, and the fierce sincerity of it was the flame for his martyrdom.

"Yes. Him and no other."

In the days that were to come when he was to discover the essential falseness and selfishness of the world, Fairfax's manhood was to hold fast to this memory of how one woman had told him the truth. He did not realize the greatness of her then, in that she had met him face to face, and given him the steel rather than the smile of a woman who knows how to use and to fool a man. He was to hear the world call her a harlot, the world of intriguers, bullies, pimps and prostitutes—men who put on their honour with their periwigs, and put it off as easily; women whose chastity was but part of their wardrobe. But for the moment he was in darkness. His youth uttered a cry of disillusionment and pain. He turned away from the window, from the thought of her glorious voice, from a beauty that seemed to him the beauty of a Lamia.

"So that is the end, John, of your midsummer night's madness?"

There was no bitterness in her voice, and yet there was a something in it that challenged and accused. He hesitated, and turned again to the window.

"I have no right to be here."

"And yet I thank you for coming, John. I have told you the truth, because I think you are not like other

men. You will go away despising me, and I shall feel that I have hurt the child in you."

He came back, and stood leaning with his hands on the mullions of the window.

"Why do you speak like this? How can you hurt me, or I you?"

"You are hurting me, John, and it is because I have hurt you that you must hit back."

"No!" he said fiercely. "No!"

"Yes, but it is so. We cannot help it, for we are not beasts of the field; we are not bad at heart. Oh, this world, John, this world of mockery and make-believe, where nothing is sacred! How we cry out for something fine and heroic, some act, some soul that shall give the lie to all these mocking, selfish mouths."

He rested his forehead against his right arm.

"I know. I have grown so much older in a day. To be a little finer than oneself; that's it, is it not?"

And then he uncovered his white and striving face to her, suddenly and with passion.

"Let us walk out into the fields, you and I together. There is something that I am looking for and have not found. Will you come?"

He held out a hand. She took it and held it fast.

"Yes. Help me, John."

He bent and kissed her hand, and stepping up on the window-seat and the broad low sill she came out to him, letting him help her to the ground. The grass was wet with dew, and her satin shoes were soon soaked with it as she led him through a gate into the park. A great stillness lay upon the fields, and the night was full of moist perfume. The stars were shining, and the crescent of a new moon gave a little gentle light. There was a greyness everywhere, a greyness that changed to black under the hedgerows and under the spreading boughs of the great trees. And there in the stillness of the fine night they wandered together along the hedgerows, walking a little apart and very slowly, and hiding nothing from each other's hearts.

"Men only love that which they can seize, John."

"Am I like that?"

"You were like that this morning; it came upon you suddenly. And now your righteous and innocent soul is filled with a horror of me. I am unclean, the Scarlet Woman, the King's harlot."

"My God!"

They had paused at a field-gate, and he bent across it as though he were on the rack, and she stood and waited on his young man's anguish, knowing that it was best that he should suffer.

"Poor Mr. Fairfax! I have had to hurt you, and I did not want to hurt you. Have you not one little thought of what my love may mean to the King?"

"Sin!" he blurted.

"Oh, my dear, will you too brand me with the hot iron! I loved the man before he was married, but I could not be his wife, John. I know that my love is something to him, more than the world guesses. Have you ever thought what it means to be a king?"

"No."

"To love to order, to have your friends thrust upon you, to know that your very friend may be a fawner, a hunter of favours. Never to be the man you really are, never to show your heart or to speak what is in it. To be watched, flattered, betrayed."

"Yes, that is true."

"And I have tried to give him all that the world could not give. To me he is Charles Stuart, not King of England. So much am I his, and he mine, that we keep this great secret sacred. And what have I to bear, because in this dear deceit I must think of him as a profligate——"

She was very white and still, tortured yet strangely exultant.

"Have I no sacrifice to make, John? Should I not have hell in my heart if my greater love did not cast it out? The world does not know my love, nor the real heart of the man who loves me. He is a trifler, a man of pleasure, the seeming fool of any wench! But I am telling you too much, touching his great secret. That is the woman I am, John, . . . and you may brand me if it pleases you."

Fairfax was leaning over the gate, and looking at the soft level of a field dimly grey with the dew and the

starlight. Her words had moved him to a strange, calm tenderness. His instinctive cry had been for relief, chivalry.

"God forbid," he said; "yet, tell me, what was I to be, a disguise for the King?"

"You see nothing but shame in it?"

"I do not know what I see. The world seems upside down, and yet I know that I love you."

"With a love that stands aside and bites bitterly at its finger-nails?"

He straightened and, turning to her, stood erect, triumphant.

"No, by my soul, I will be better than myself. I will try and prove to my own soul that we are not beasts of the field. I will serve you."

She stood looking at him with great steadfastness.

"John, I thank you. I think you will stand very near the King."

CHAPTER IX

INTO the great world of Whitehall entered John Fairfax, Esq., Gentleman, of Shere Hall in the County of Surrey. He was a little less than a name among all those hundreds, a swarthy young man whom no one noticed—save perhaps the few who were in more intimate nearness to the King. If there was anything that distinguished him from the humblest of the King's servants it was that Sir Roger Pagan was his uncle, and that Pagan's influence had put him where he stood. Groom of the Privy Chamber. The title might mean so much and so little, but in that flamboyant, swaggering world a man was counted as little and of no significance unless he flapped his wings in the faces of his fellows.

Fairfax had grown ten years older in one night. He walked circumspectly, quietly, carrying a secret in his heart, and hiding it with a shrewdness and a devotion that eschewed all swagger. He had taken the sacrament, and the act of faith had filled him with a strange contentment, a sense of his being chosen, sealed and inspired, a man who guarded the little flame of chivalry in his heart, and was warmed by it as by the breath of a living God.

But he lived and moved in the Palace of Whitehall, and studied its life and its moods and passions with the eyes of one who stood a little apart, like a lonely soul in a gallery watching a dance below. Yet Fairfax was not lonely. There were those intensely stimulating moments when he stood alone before the King, and looked with eyes of curiosity, yet of affection, upon the man whom Barbara Rackstraw loved. For Charles was an enigma—this Charles whom Fairfax stood before in that quiet corner of Whitehall. He made John think of an actor who had finished his part for the day, walked off the stage, thrown away his wig and his buskins, and rushed home to be

himself. Fairfax was puzzled at first by Charles's naked naturalness. He began by being a little afraid of it, for it was so very different from the naturalness that the King showed to the world. At his levées, or when he moved before the eyes of the Court, he carried himself with an easy and almost casual dignity that was deceptive. He was gracious, arch, merry, extraordinarily quick, never forgetful of a face, never unapproachable, frankly good-humoured. Yet a cynical observer would have said of him: "The man is charming, but essentially frivolous. He asks only to be amused."

There were not six people in all the Court who knew the King as Fairfax came to know him. This Charles Stuart was extraordinarily magnetic. He was so human, so natural, so unexpectedly in earnest, that the few who saw him in those secret moments were not able to resist his fascination. He made devoted slaves of them, and Fairfax became one of those slaves.

Charles went straight to the heart of the matter.

"So I have a rival in you, John."

Fairfax stood helpless, disarmed by a frankness that swept aside all subterfuges.

"Your Majesty knows——"

"I know, John, for she has told me, that you behaved as a very notable and eccentric gentleman. Such eccentricity is rare; I have learnt that to my cost. Fools say: 'Trust nobody.' That is why most men, being fools, are always fooled. So I trust you, John, as I trust a gentleman and a man of honour."

"I shall try not to fail you, sir."

Charles was leaning forward with his elbows on the table.

"Yet there are not ten souls in Whitehall who trust me, John. The King is a weather-cock. Tell me, my friend, do you find it hard to be the man of honour?"

"How so, your Majesty?"

"When I hold what you desire. Do you not wish to fool me, to slip into my shoes?"

"There are two men in every man, sir; at least, that is how I find myself. One man could thief like a cur, the other man could hardly bear to live with the stench of some mean act hanging in his nostrils."

"You are in love, John. I do not blame you, nor am I jealous. In her I have found the one woman who has never failed me, and the world thinks me a profligate. And damn it, so I am ; a man hung about with a dozen intrigues, rags to hide a secret chastity. And yet life is a marvellous game."

He laughed, but his laughter was serious.

"This country was sick of sour faces, and it wanted a man who could laugh. So I teach them to laugh, John, but some day they will find me the master. Go and bawl that in the City, Mr. Fairfax, and no one will believe you. The world paints a portrait and tags a label to it: 'Ye Merry Fool,' and that portrait hangs for all time."

He gave Fairfax the letter that he was to carry to Barbara Rackstraw, but as John turned to the door, Charles called him back.

"John !"

"Your Majesty ?"

"Be careful how you quarrel. Do you understand me ?"

"Sir, there are ways in which I am not yet fit to serve you. I go to Falconer's each morning and fence with him."

"That's good. But, man, if you quarrel wantonly I shall have no use for you. There is a part of me that is as hard as iron. A good servant never brawls."

His eyes were severe, searchingly fierce and steady.

"I could trust no quarrelsome fool in such a service. Understand that there is danger in what you do. I have let it be known that Sir Roger Pagan has some enterprise of mine in hand, and that I have brought you into the place that you may act as messenger between us. Go out and see the world, John, every corner and hole of it ; a man who is ambitious cannot see too much. Those days after the rout at Worcester taught me more than even I had dreamed of. Someone once said to me: 'A man who has not entered a brothel has not begun to learn the alphabet of woman.' I do not send you to brothels, John, but learn, man, learn ; throw away your books, and some day you may find yourself bound in vellum."

So Fairfax learnt to walk warily, avoiding the toes of the gallants, and the tongues of men who were ready

with their swords. No one took much notice of him; he came and went, an obscure young man in somewhat staid and quiet clothes. The pages of the back stairs nicknamed him "The Surrey Silence" or "Pagan's Pup." Even when his service got him mixed in a crowd he stood aside in a corner and had nothing to say. Other men pushed past him and never asked each other: "Who's the swarthy chap there in the corner?"

Of petticoats John saw nothing at all, and yet he hated every petticoat in Whitehall. More especially did he hate the arrogant beauty of Lady Castlemaine, Charles's acknowledged mistress and yet in John's hatred there was a touch of scorn. He remembered the sardonic look in the eyes of the King. "The rags under which I hide a secret chastity."

Rags, yes, the gaudiest of rags, but on those secret pilgrimages of his Fairfax would hang over some gate, look at the stars, and ask himself the meaning of this mystery. Why should the King advertise a profligacy with a cynicism that made the sobersides and fanatics of the City think him a debased and frivolous fool? Was there a purpose behind it, a shrewd and considered policy that dressed itself in the clothes of a libertine and a fop? Charles flaunted the one affair, concealed the other, and the very secrecy of his love for Barbara Rackstraw gave Fairfax the thread that seemed to lead into the inner character of the King.

This woman mattered. Charles was the man to her, not merely the King. The relationship had a sacredness that set it apart from the cynical profligacy of the Court, and it seemed to Fairfax that Charles had sworn to keep this one great love untarnished. He hid it away with a delicacy and a tenderness that belonged to his deeper life. She was the Mistress of his Soul, a woman to whom he turned in secret as a man slips away into some green and quiet spot where he may lie at length and think. Perhaps he had a horror of seeing her become like those other women, hard-eyed, insolent, shameless, putting on their smiles for him as they put on their powder or their paint.

Fairfax would walk out to Marybone in the dark, chang-

ing his path so that he should not become too familiar a figure in the lanes, and entering the park, wait under the shadow of some tree until he heard her touch three notes on the virginal. Then he would climb the fence and find her in the garden, walking up and down on the lawn where the sun-dial stood. She was wonderfully well served, for never once were they disturbed, nor did Fairfax ever see a servant. He would give her the letter and she would suffer him to tarry a while and walk with her in the garden.

It was a strange anguish to John, and yet he dreamt of it nightly and went home with the warmth of it in his blood. She trusted him, and made so plain a proclamation of her trust that his honour could do nothing but march up and down on guard. But she would let him talk to her, and would answer many of his questions, and sometimes she played on the virginal and sang.

He became her eyes and her ears, telling her the news, the gossip of the day. It was a matter of surprise to him that she seemed much interested in the City, and in what the sobersides and the 'prentices said and thought. John could not help her here, yet this lack of knowledge could easily be remedied. He had friends and acquaintances in the City, a Mr. Burgess of Wood Street, and a Mr. Linklater, who had a warehouse near the old Exchange.

"Why should the City gossip interest you?"

"All news is news to me, John. I might go out with a basket of oranges and stand outside the Cockpit in Drury Lane. It is not easy for a woman to know what is said in the taverns and at the street corners. Now and again, as you know, I drive in the park, or I go to church and listen to a sermon."

He began to understand that she too had a part to play, and if her heart were the King's, her head was his also. She had the wisdom that is born of intuition. She felt, and through her feelings knew, while duller people groped in the dark. She did not tell John that she was Charles's second soul, and that he came to her for the deeper wisdom; but perhaps John guessed it.

There were days when she would drive in one of the parks, and leave her coach as she had left it in the

morning when Fairfax had delivered that first letter. Here, too, her past and present seemed to link themselves. She was besieged, surrounded ; not because any man knew her secret, but because of her notable beauty and because of the provoking mystery that surrounded her. John was forewarned of these parades. He attended many of them, moving among her little crowd of courtiers, almost unnoticed by her, hating the business as fiercely as she hated it.

" My vanity is a dead dog, John," she confessed, " but a woman must never confess to it, or other men would begin to suspect."

From these gentlemen who desired her John learnt that she was supposed to have become religious. He heard their cynical asides, and hid the blaze in his heart.

" When a woman becomes religious, Sam, what's the secret ? "

" Her footman, dear boy."

And Fairfax, inwardly raging, wished he could smite the whole crew of them in the face. But chiefly did he loathe the exquisite insolence of Teg Hargreaves, sensing in him a superior shrewdness, and an audacity that the others lacked. He was a smallish man with a hard, square head, a pair of angry and insolent blue eyes, and the chin and throat of a bull. He had a deep chest, very muscular legs, and he walked with a springy lift of the heels and a slight swing of the shoulders. He was a very great fop ; he drawled ; he was pestilentially polite, and yet he was the most dangerous little brute within ten miles of Paul's Cross. Other men were very careful lest they should tread on his toes. Fairfax despised him in those early days, not having gauged the solid philosophy that this man carried in his hard round head. His symbol was the sword. It was fated to push him a path to power, while Fairfax, the man of honour, found himself in the gutter.

Hargreaves was showing some forwardness in his attack upon the lady of the coach. Fairfax would watch them. Her seriousness grew very marked in the face of this man's importunity ; she smiled but little, and her wit played on him with a purpose. It was tiredness that

she suggested, ennui, an unworldly melancholy that Hargreaves could not follow. His full-blooded vitality could not pique her; the language of the gay world was no longer hers. Fairfax had a suspicion that she aimed at boring these men, and that these appearances in the park had that purpose and no other. She was conducting a subtle retreat, and desired to make it so wearisome that no adventurous gentleman should feel it worth his while to follow.

She said as much to Fairfax when he came to her in a mood of anger that could scarcely be controlled.

"Do not lose your temper on my account, John. I am making myself seem so dull and prosy to these gallants that I can see myself walking the whole length of the park without one fool man stopping to pay me a compliment."

Moreover, Fairfax had had to swallow his pride, and the humiliation of it had not made him love Hargreaves the more. He had walked into the man one morning round the corner of a passage leading to the Tennis Court, and Hargreaves had put his elbow in John's ribs.

"Hell take your hurry, you oaf!"

Fairfax had trembled, right hand clenched, his eyes sullen and half averted. He had mastered the impulse and taken the insult, and he had heard Hargreaves laugh.

He did not tell "my lady" of that, for it was one of those memories that make a man feel hot from head to toe.

So Fairfax won but little from that love of his save a sense of warmth at the heart, and the *panache* of a loyal pride. He was trusted; he was suffered to walk with "my lady" in the moonlight and to listen to her voice; he met the silent, understanding smile of the King; he gathered that old Pagan looked at him with eyes of approval. For the rest he spent his leisure in fencing, in taking lessons in French and Italian, and in trying to read the book of life and not the books upon his shelves. He wrote an occasional letter to Luce Paradell, but he hardly thought of her between the letters. He made Honeyman give him a key of the street door, and tried

not to feel hot when the man capped his compliance with an arch innuendo. Jeremy had contrived to lose a second set of buttons, and had shown a tendency to brawl in taverns of the lower sort, and Fairfax had sent him back to Shere. Honeyman provided a substitute, a fellow who was supposed to be religious, and had a passion for seeing men hanged.

That great gentleman who took "Thorough" for his motto may never have discovered the paradox that such a motto implies. Fairfax was thorough in his love, in his swordsmanship, in all those multifarious details of life that may end by making a man a tavern-bore or a Lord Chancellor. Mrs. Rackstraw had hinted at a curiosity that it was not easy for her to satisfy, and Fairfax, accepting her curiosity as his, went down into the tavern and the market-place and used his ears and his eyes. He penetrated everywhere, exploring the noisy narrowness of old London from Temple Bar to Aldgate. He put on sober clothes and dined with Mr. Burgess of Wood Street and Mr. Linklater of St. Bartholomew's Lane, Presbyterians both of them and no lovers of Whitehall. They thought the King a dissipated fool, and said so. Fairfax met other merchants and traders at these two houses, and became a frequenter of one of the City taverns and of one of the new coffee-houses near the Exchange. He went with Mr. Woods and his family to Bagnigge Wells, and could not help seeing that Miss Rachael Woods thought him a very presentable fellow. He saw a play at the Cockpit and thought it dirty and dull. Mulberry Gardens bored him excessively. He saw a fencing match between two masters, explored the Temple and Lincoln's Inn, and even penetrated into Whitefriars. But here a filthy woman smelling of brandy caught him by the coat-tails, and he had to bribe her to escape the privilege of half an hour's cheap embarrassment. On Sunday he went either to the Chapel Royal or St. Paul's, till it occurred to him that it was his duty to hear a City sermon. He heard it, and came away wondering whether any frail mortal would escape hell. As for the river, it became a familiar by-way. He learnt the names of all the stairs and City passages where a gentleman might not safely go at night,

unless he had a fondness for being found by the "watch" walking the streets in nothing more seemly than a shirt. He began to grow familiar with the City slang and to know the meaning of "Ruffler," "Rook," "Whipjack," "Mumper," "Clapper Doyen."

But London was more than all this, more than a tangle of black and white houses strung on the sliding silver of the river, a city of a hundred churches and a thousand bells, of narrow ways, dark courts, and sharp prick-eared gables. It was a vast smell, a medley of smells, a movement, a swarming ant-heap, a human heat, an oath, a flashing eye, a laugh, an eructation, a woman's leg half seen under a swinging petticoat. Of the coarse, strong eagerness of the life Fairfax had many vivid glimpses, pictures that a man sees when he wanders abroad at all hours and is in no hurry.

Such pictures as these.

A man in his shirt and breeches being carried out of a house and rushed into a coach, his face like dirty chalk, his mouth wide open, a great red patch over his heart. In the deeps of the house a woman's wild screams and laughter. Overhead, at a window, and seen only for a moment, a sombrely gloating face, the face of a man to whom murder had been an ecstasy.

A brawl in a tavern. Red, screaming faces, and overturned tables. A hand swinging a stone bottle. A forehead covered with blood.

A man in a cassock holding a girl against some railings, his mouth sucking at her throat, while the moon came and went behind little clouds.

Two watermen fighting in the mud at the bottom of Temple Stairs.

A painted lady in a black and yellow sedan chair, and a gallant following the chair with a smile on his face.

A dozen merchants, half fuddled, arguing with many oaths in a tavern.

A little girl with the face of an angel picking a blind man's pocket.

It was a city of violent appetites and violent passions, proud, arrogant, and very quarrelsome, still revealing those flashes of fanaticism that made Fairfax think of the

King sitting in his closet behind a table covered with papers. There were days when Fairfax loathed the great city, and felt he could take it by its swollen, boastful throat and beat blood into its eyes. He hated its bigotry as fiercely as he hated its belching coarseness. And often he wondered whether the King loathed it and schemed to see it sick to death and humbled in the dust.

Fairfax was older, much older, and life was teaching him to eat his own heart.

"John, you will attend me to-night. Be at the conduit in Hedge Lane at ten o'clock."

Fairfax was there, walking restlessly up and down, conscious of life as a desirable thing embraced by the great arms of that great city. His youth was a wild yet inarticulate uproar, a discord that he tried to smother with a hand over its mouth.

When the King came, all alone, and tapping out a signal with his stick, Fairfax fell a-trembling. His marrow felt like ice. He was to be a shadow, following the live lover whose hands would touch the beauty that he desired. He was paralysed for the moment by a spasm of spiritual pain that produced such a nausea in him that he did not know whether to curse or to pray.

"It goes hard with you, John."

A hand was on his shoulder.

"Go back to bed, lad, I can walk alone."

Fairfax was afraid that Charles would feel his trembling. He set his teeth and his muscles and stood firm.

"No, sir, I learn to serve."

The King's hand remained on his shoulder.

"Remember, John, I did not take her from you."

For an hour Fairfax kept watch outside the house, walking up and down the paths and over the grass, his face white as the moon. He was tortured listening to their voices, the voices of lovers, hushed, secret, intimate, tenderly wanton. They tore at his heart in the darkness. He walked up and down, never pausing, wishing that he could stop up his ears, tear the imagination out of his brain. And all the while he fought for the fineness of his faith, scourging his poor body with the ideal of self-sacrifice.

Presently he heard a lattice open. The King came out by the window of the music-room, stepping down from the low ledge. He stood there a moment. Fairfax was by the sun-dial. He heard himself called :

"John."

It was Barbara Rackstraw's voice, but Fairfax did not move.

"John, come here."

This time it was the voice of the King.

Fairfax obeyed, and Charles, walking forward across the wet grass, left John for a moment at the window. A hand was stretched out to him, a white hand, warm and fragrant.

"Thank you, John."

He bent and kissed it with a kind of fierceness, and as she withdrew her hand she touched his hair with a touch that was almost a caress.

CHAPTER X

ONE showery morning in July John had passed through the Holbein Gate on the way to his lodging, when he met three gentlemen walking towards him and holding the middle of the road. Mr. Teg Hargreaves was the pivot and centre of the trio, very merry and debonair in yellow satin, and carrying no cloak in spite of the rain. He wore his beaver curled in the new fashion ; in fact, he had created the new trick, and the two toadies who walked with him wore their hats cocked like his.

Fairfax's eyes caught the yellow figure full flare. He saw Hargreaves give a nudge to his two toadies, and as they bore down on Fairfax they trained their guns on him like tall ships sailing into action. John had to beat to quarters and take their fire without flinching. The three of them began to laugh when they were twenty paces from him, and John, all hot about the ears and neck, made himself meet Teg Hargreaves's eyes.

"Damn it, this fellow stares too much."

Fairfax glanced aside, wondering whether he looked as savage as he felt.

"He likes the new cock of your hat, Teg."

"Why, to be sure, it is the gentleman's cock, and not for cocks who can't crow."

Fairfax swept past and on, and heard them laughing and chattering till they reached the gate. The incident left him angry and puzzled. There seemed no reason for the gratuitous insolence of the thing, seeing that Fairfax had been careful to keep his shadow out of Hargreaves's path. It occurred to him that the explanation might lie in that very carefulness. This gentleman in yellow was dog-quick to see when another dog was shy and unfriendly, and a meek tail and a blind eye provoked him.

Fairfax found a letter from Mr. Burgess awaiting him,

with an invitation to sup that night in Wood Street. He was free, and he sat down and wrote to say that he would sup there with pleasure. Thinking that he had heard Bailey—his new man—moving in the bedroom, he called to him.

It was Honeyman who appeared.

"Bailey is out, sir."

"Where?"

"Looking for a Bible, sir, in Paternoster Row!"

"Send him up when he returns."

Bailey came in an hour later. He was a mild, demure little man with flat eyes and a nose like the snout of a pike. His conversation was an echo of what was said to him; usually he repeated the words with meticulous exactness.

"Take this letter to Mr. Burgess of Wood Street."

"This letter to Mr. Burgess of Wood Street, sir."

"I am supping there to-night."

"His honour is supping there to-night."

"I shall not need you, Bailey."

The lackey bowed, took the letter, but hesitated at the door.

"May I ask a favour, sir?"

"Yes."

"There is a meeting of certain friends and sober men at Mr. Pounds' off Fetter Lane to-morrow evening. I have been moved to attend, sir."

"Go, Bailey, by all means."

"I would not inconvenience your honour. It may be that you will sup at home to-morrow night."

"No, I shall be out, and late, at Sir Roger Pagan's. Go to your meeting, Bailey."

"I thank you, sir."

The fellow was such a woodlouse, such a mild crawler, that Fairfax had thought of him as a very efficient lackey and nothing more.

Mr. Pounds preached to those earnest young men who gathered together in his house in Fetter Lane, but Bailey was not among them. He came hurrying home at eleven o'clock at night with dusty shoes and a rent in one of his black stockings. Fairfax returned about half an hour

later, letting himself into the house with his key, to find Bailey lounging on the bench in the passage. The lackey had put on clean shoes and changed his stockings.

"What, not a-bed, Bailey?"

"I waited to see if I could serve your honour in any way."

"No, I think not. And was Mr. Pounds eloquent?"

"He gave us such a discourse, sir, the like of which I have never heard."

Nor did Fairfax know that this fellow of his went daily to Queen Street, Covent Garden, where Mr. Hargreaves had a house, and that he passed on certain information to Teg Hargreaves's lackey, who passed it to his master. Bailey's report was scribbled on odd bits of paper, and took the form of a diary that concerned itself with Fairfax's movements. John was described as "my lord," Sir Roger as "Mr. Heathen," the house on the edge of Marybone Park as "The Dovecot." . . . "My lord at Whitehall. My lord goes out after supper, as is his custom. He walks to Marybone by the lanes; I hear him talk to the lady in the Dovecot garden." "My lord tells me that he goes to Mr. Heathen's and will be late. I follow him to Mr. Heathen's, but he does not go there. He walks to Marybone." "To-night a stranger went with my lord to the Dovecot." Such were Bailey's notes, the scribbling of a quick-witted spy.

The house of Theophilus Egmond Hargreaves was a resort of the Court wits and exquisites. A new house, and one of a row, its yellowish-white façade resembled the beautifully laced and embroidered front of a herald's tabard. Its three stories were divided by string-courses of white stone, and topped by a stone cornice. The mullions of the square windows were of timber, and the glass in the windows coloured in delicate bottle-green. The wall spaces between the string-courses were covered with plaster reliefs, garlands, shields, classic heads, mermaids, Tritons. It had two doors, painted olive green, each covered by a carved stone canopy. There were boxes full of flowers in the windows of the first floor.

This house was the centre of a little world of cynics, sceptics, poets, swordsmen, adventurers, gentlemanly

pimps and parasites. It was the house of the young men who were yet to be. Trevanion would sit at the window with his harsh mouth and black nostrils, emitting cruelties that had earned him the nickname of "Scorn." Richard Harley, the poet, they called "Hope," because he was still seeking for the woman who was chaste. Lord Montfichet, the drunkard, had been christened "Charity," for he could never deny a woman anything, even if she happened to be a fishwife. Everything was turned to mockery. Life was a clever paradox. If you debauched a woman and thrashed her husband when he objected, you tried to make an epigram on the adventure. The whole zest of the great game of living was that a man could cheat, and if he cheated his best friends the joke was all the more pungent.

It was a house of laughter, the loud, strong laughter of young men. They crowded at its windows in their satins and velvets, like painted figures on a frieze. You could judge the temper of the house by the faces of the women who passed, and by the way they looked up at the window or did not look. The wenches of Drury Lane were as bold as the gentlemen, walking with hips that went swig-a-swig, eyes full and roguish perhaps, a red tongue thrust out or a petticoat pulled knee-high. Gentler women went by as though they were afraid, trying to look calm and unself-conscious. No one was spared. These young exquisites threw their insolence and their mockery into the street as a woman empties her slops. If a man looked up angrily he was lucky if he did not get an empty wine-bottle or a flowerpot on his head.

Yet among all these men Teg Hargreaves was the one who had learnt to hold his tongue. He laughed, he bullied, he mocked, but when some hazard was his, his mouth shut like the doors of a priest's hole. He boasted over trifles, but when he had some matter of ambition in hand, he never boasted till he had accomplished it. He looked a fop, and was, in fact, as hard and as shrewd as it was possible for a man to be.

Hargreaves burnt those scribblings that Bailey brought him, and said nothing. There was to be a "mock masque" at my Lord of Osmond's place on the night of Thursday. It was said that the King would be there. Trevanion

had written some of the verses. But Hargreaves, pressed by some of his familiars, made excuses.

"I have an adventure," he said.

They left it at that, for Hargreaves was not a man who tolerated explanations.

"Well, good luck, Teg."

"Does she use musk or civet?"

"No; gillyflower water, you fool."

They passed down the stairs, each intent upon some affair of his own, for youth in the full heat of its noon has the heart of a highwayman.

Fairfax left his lodging soon after nine on the night of the Thursday. It was to be one of those nights of self-torment and smothered passion, for at the conduit he would meet the King. A full moon was coming up, cutting the streets into a chequer of bright light and the blackest of shadows, but Fairfax went calmly towards the crisis of his life, conscious of no shadows save the shadow of his own baulked love. He met the King and they walked through the field-paths, meeting nobody, and seldom speaking to each other. Charles had a deep, absorbed look. Something had angered him.

Barbara Rackstraw sang to her lover, and John, wandering like a lonely sentinel in the moonlit garden, thought of that first night when he had dreamed sudden intoxicating dreams. The strings of his heart were for her hands to play upon. Yet in his loneliness he walked up and down, trying to feel that he was strangely great, part of the immensity up yonder of the mystery behind the stars. If his head were full of tragic nonsense, there is yet a dignity about the romantic fool that the penny-wise grocer cannot display. Since life seems an illusion, why open the eyes of the dreamers? It may be that the blind are those who see.

Fairfax never attempted to explain the impulse that sent him out into the lane a little while before the King stepped down from his love's window. The lane ran straight to the fullness of the moon, and there were no shadows on the ground between the black lines of the hedges. Fairfax walked a little way down the lane, thinking of nothing so dramatic as an ambush. He was looking at the moon

when a man stepped out from behind a thorn bush, and so close that Fairfax could have touched him.

"Ha, Mr. Pagan's Pup!"

The recognition of him and his insolence and the significance of his thick sturdiness standing there in the moonlight was like a flash of powder in the pan of John's brain. It lit up the thought of the King ready to walk out of Barbara Rackstraw's house, the betrayal of his secret and of hers. Fairfax saw his enemy and hers in that flash of inward light, and he struck out with his bare fist, and then closed with a suddenness that prevented it becoming an affair of swords.

They fell into the hedge together, and crashed down into it with a ripping of twigs and branches. Fairfax stayed uppermost, though Hargreaves had all the strength of a smallish, big-muscled man. Neither of them spoke. They fought it out in silence, body to body, like a couple of dogs under a bed.

At the back of John's violence was the thought that this man had to be made blind and deaf until the King was away on the road to Westminster. They had twisted and rolled free of the hedge, and John had Hargreaves under him with a savage knee in the man's middle, and thumb and finger deep in his throat.

"Get off me, damn you!"

He blew spittle and fury.

"Let me up, like a man."

The lane was full of loose stones, some of them as big as an orange. Fairfax's right knee rolled on one. He groped for it, and used it as a savage of the Stone Age used his celt. He felt Hargreaves's furious body relax; the muscles in his throat seemed to soften; he lay still.

Fairfax got up, breathing fast and hard. He listened and heard nothing. Hargreaves lay like a drunken man, all a-sprawl in the moonlight. Fairfax bent down, and getting his hands under Hargreaves's arm-pits, half lifted and half rolled him into the hedge.

The man's hat lay in the lane, with Fairfax's close to it. He pitched Hargreaves's into the blackness, and putting on his own, walked back towards the house. Turning

in at the gate under the arch of the yew hedge, he met Charles coming down the path.

"Is that you, John?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought I heard voices."

"Some drunken fool going home to his cottage, sir. He is away."

They walked down the lane together, past the place where Teg Hargreaves lay hidden in the hedge, and there was not a sound, not even the sound of a man's breathing. Fairfax wondered whether he had killed him. There was a savage pleasure in the thought of it, an animal exultation that ceased to exult directly Fairfax's imagination began to use its eyes.

"What a moon, John!"

"The harvest moon, your Majesty."

"A cynic, my friend, looking at those eternal harvests that men dream of."

They walked on into the moonlight, and a conception of the moon's calm and stubborn silence entered Fairfax's thoughts. He too chose to be silent. He said nothing of Hargreaves to the King.

CHAPTER XI

FAIRFAX went to his lodging in Honeyman's house, but with no thought of sleep. All the lights were out, with the exception of a candle in the passage, and Bailey was snoring on the settle behind the door. He woke with a gulp, to see his master taking the candle from the sconce, and in an instant the place was in darkness.

"Deuce take the thing."

Fairfax had dropped the candle on the floor. His clothes might have passed in the moonlight, but he did not wish the lackey to see all their dust and disorder.

"The hot grease ran over my fingers."

"There is a tinder-box, sir, in the cupboard."

"Never trouble, man. I can see my way. The moon is bright enough to shave by. Get to bed."

He went up the stairs, entered his room, and shot the bolt. Bailey followed him, and paused outside the door.

"At what hour will you breakfast, sir?"

"At eight, Bailey."

Fairfax sat down on the bed, and heard the lackey stumble up the stairs to his attic. A door closed gently, and all was silence, and Fairfax was conscious of a great sense of relief. He wanted to think, to put the pieces of this problem in order, to make a picture of it, a map. But he began to move about the room, because a restless and unstrung man can often think more clearly when his body is in motion. He took off his crumpled lace collar, the coat with half the buttons torn from it, his breeches that were burst over the left knee. What to do with the things he did not know, and so bundled them into a chest that stood behind the door.

There was some blood on his left knee. He looked at it vaguely, sensing it merely as a sort of dirty shadow, while his consciousness was absorbed in thinking of what had happened and what yet might happen. If Hargreaves were dead? Lying stiff in the hedge of the lane near

Barbara Rackstraw's house! He would have to go back, and go back before daylight. He would have to make sure.

But if Hargreaves were alive, if he had disappeared, and managed to stumble home, then the future was as obvious as the face of the moon. It would mean an affair of the sword. A man could do no more than shut his mouth and go through with the adventure to the end.

When he had changed into clean clothes, Fairfax sat on his bed for an hour, and faced the thing out. Somehow, he had a feeling that Hargreaves was not dead, but a very live man, who would be very forward in taking his revenge. Fairfax was under no illusion as to his own chance of survival. He would be pitted against a man who was acknowledged to be one of the best swordsmen of the day, a man who would show him no mercy.

He was afraid and yet not afraid. There was still a little exultation in him, the pride of the chivalrous madman, the knowledge that he had not failed. He even smiled as he sat there in the edge of the moonlight, and remembered how Hargreaves's strong and arrogant little body had slackened and crumpled under his. And then he fell to thinking of Barbara Rackstraw and what she would say to him when he told her all that had happened. He would have to tell her, warn her how nearly her secret had been discovered. He had not told the King, because—well, it would have seemed like touting for the King's protection.

Honeyman's clock had struck one when Fairfax went softly, walking in his stockings, from his bed-chamber to his keeping-room. There was wine on the buffet, and a plate of cakes in the cupboard. Fairfax drank and ate, and that secret feast of cakes and wine reminded him of nights when he had gone marauding as a boy. He sat at the window, and opening one of the casements, saw the moonlight on the cobbles of the street. The silence made the whole affair seem strangely unreal. He could hardly believe that this was London, and that he himself was in danger of death.

In the darkness before dawn Fairfax got out of Honeyman's house, putting on his shoes in the passage, and holding back for a moment in the doorway to listen for

footsteps or the sound of a watchman's bell. In the Strand he met nothing but a forlorn cat disillusioned after a night of adventure, and the animal followed Fairfax in the darkness, mewing.

Fairfax laughed. He was restless and overwrought, and he stopped to tickle the cat's chin. The feel of the beast's fur and the warmth of its body made the silence of everything and the chill of the hour before dawn seem less inhuman. As John walked on he remembered how he had come to London with an ambitious man's appetite for adventure nicely spiced and savoured. He had expected romantic and rather respectable adventures, some pretty affair of the heart, not the Strand and a cat at three in the morning and the thought of a man whose head he had smashed with a stone.

The sky was growing grey when he entered the arch of the lane leading to Barbara Rackstraw's house. Everything was grey, the lane, the grass, the dew-drenched hedges, the sky, his own face. A rabbit dipped into the hedge with the flash of a white scut. He felt the chill of the dawn clinging to him like a wet sheet. And then he came to the place where he had left Hargreaves lying. He saw a sort of broken depression in the hedge, bent twigs and a patch of crushed grass and nettles, but no man. Fairfax searched the lane from end to end. He wandered about the spaces of the wild park, and found nothing.

Then he stood still, leaning against the trunk of a beech tree, and looking at the chimneys of Barbara's house black against the dawn. So he was no murderer, but a man who was likely to be murdered. He did not know whether he was glad or sorry; there was no glow of romance in him, only a feeling of stubborn apathy. He was conscious of something that stood apart, watching him, a grey shape in the dawn. It was fear, that vague and nameless dread of death, of the unknown, of the afterwards, that instinctive shrinking of the warm flesh from the thought of nothingness and worms.

But this would not do! Where was the swagger of life, the zest, the spirit of youth and adventure, the heart that is never dismayed? Damn it, but was he going to shiver and grow cold when the crisis came? Were men

made like that, just a little drunken madness to be followed by a feeling of a lump of unbaked bread in the stomach? John's obstinacy shouldered its way in. It is obstinacy, not courage, that has carried many a man through the so-called romantic adventures. Nothing is as he had expected it to be, and with the soul of a mule he exclaims: "Even if the path is of flints, I climb, I go on."

In this stubborn mood he mounted the fence of Mrs. Rackstraw's garden, pushed through the shrubs, and found himself on the lawn. The house looked all black and grey with a breadth of yellow sky behind it, very peaceful and very still. He knew that her bed-chamber was above the music-room, the window looking out upon the lawn, and he threw a handful of dirt from one of the borders at it, and when nothing happened he threw a stone, lobbing it in through the open lattice and hearing it strike the floor.

He had not to wait. There was a sound of stirring within, the creak of a bed and the softness of bare feet touching the floor. She came to the window with a red cloak over her shoulders, one hand holding a fold of it over the whiteness of her bosom. And Fairfax felt strangely moved. The sight of her in her red cloak, with her throat all soft and white, her black hair in disorder, her shining mouth and still sleepy eyes, brought the thought of an embrace. He could picture the white sheets turned back, the hollow shape she had left in the warmth of the bed, the sweet smell of her, the woman. He became inspired again by something greater than his stubbornness.

"John!"

He made a sign to her to come down, and to be silent. She disappeared. He heard her moving softly about her room, and as he stood there waiting he was conscious of one dominant desire, that this woman should think well of him. He wanted to see that shine in her eyes, and a something that was almost love.

She came down to the music-room, and opened one of the lattices. The room was full of deep shadow, like the dark background of an old picture, and she a figure that glowed.

"What has happened?"

He did not look at her as he told his tale, but stood

leaning against one of the mullions and running a finger over the leads of the lattice. He dared not look at her. Her throat, the half-seen curves of her white shape, frightened him. Her clothes smelt of some sweet perfume. And she was so near.

"Ha! Teg Hargreaves?"

"Yes."

"And you did not tell the King?"

"Why should I tell? The affair will be on my shoulders."

She looked at him with vivid, troubled eyes.

"What, you will make it an affair of honour?"

"Of course. I shall fight and I shall say nothing."

And suddenly he became conscious of a strange exultation. He would fight as this woman's lover, as the man who had known her embrace. Somehow he had not realized it before, but now the scent of her and her nearness——!

"I must go to the King."

He looked up, slightly smiling.

"Why?"

"The man will kill you. Oh, dear heart, what a world is this!"

Fairfax still smiled.

"Will you forgive me the guilt of seeming your lover? I could not help it; I had to shield this secret of yours. I shall fight and say nothing."

"But, John—it must not happen."

His obstinacy returned, and it was unanswerable.

"It has got to happen. A man cannot run away from his honour. Besides, I shall have——"

He hesitated.

"You mean——?"

"I shall have the very great happiness of fighting as your—your lover. Do you think it would be possible for me to play the coward?"

She seemed to grasp at her bosom, to draw the red stuff like a stained cloth over a wound.

"Oh, my God, what a tangle! I can't have you killed, John—I can't——"

"I am not dead yet," he answered; "besides, I had my choice. I made it when I broke that fellow's head."

CHAPTER XII

OLD PAGAN was breakfasting under one of the lime trees in his garden when Purvis appeared, bowing John Fairfax out on to the lawn. The morning was still and sunny, yet promising heat and thunder, and the gardener who was scything the grass had opened his shirt to the waist and put a rhubarb leaf under his hat. Sir Pagan sat in the shade, with a book propped against the silver tankard on the table, and an old spaniel lying at his feet. To Fairfax, who walked on the edge of life, the little tranquil scene, with its soft yet brilliant colours, recalled the reflection seen in a mirror, a vivid concentration of colour and of atmosphere in one small panel of glass.

"Hallo, John, you are early."

"May I join you, Uncle?"

"What, no breakfast yet! Purvis, Mr. John will breakfast here."

The old spaniel had waddled forward and sniffed in a friendly fashion at Fairfax's legs, but John did not notice the dog. He unbuckled his sword and hung it on the back of a chair, and looked at the man mowing the grass, the sweating figure of Father Time whose scythe swung to and fro with a rhythm of fate. To-morrow! The thought had crossed John's mind that life was but a shadow among the grasses, and that the swinging blade was at his feet.

He sat down at the table and found Pagan's eyes fixed on him.

"We are going to have thunder."

Pagan glanced up at the sky.

"London needs washing. All those frowsy, narrow streets. What will you take, John, ale or light wine?"

"Ale, I think, sir."

Purvis was busy about the table for a minute, and Fairfax sat silently in his chair, watching the man with his scythe. It occurred to him to wonder whether the green

things of the earth felt any anguish under the scythe and the hoe.

"Help yourself, John."

He woke up. He cut bread and a wedge from a great pie, and found himself quite calm in voice and manner.

"I'm here to ask a favour, Uncle."

"It is early in the day for that, John. What is it?"

"Will you act for me, sir? I expect Mr. Hargreaves's friends. I left word with Honeyman that they would find me here. I would propose young Seymour of the Guards as my other second."

He leant across the table and helped himself to butter, using his knife. The knife was quite steady, and old Pagan noticed its steadiness. He understood Fairfax's quietness, and respected it.

"How did it happen, John?"

"Hargreaves and I got in each other's way, and I knocked him into the hedge. I couldn't help it, sir; it was not a question of temper."

He began to eat and with a good stomach for the food. Old Pagan's face was a mask, the mask of a philosopher, of a man of the world. In front of him he saw a calm young man eating his breakfast, a young man who was likely to be dead to-morrow, and yet to have hinted at the probability would not have helped John's courage. Pagan had had his share of desperate enterprises, and he had always blessed the comrade who had helped him with a devil-may-care laugh.

"I will act for you, John, with pleasure. Let me see, I have seen Hargreaves fence. He's the stylish kind, but rather short in the arm. You will have the reach of him."

"I am not going to worry about it, sir. I'm fighting in a good cause."

"Your own or a woman's?"

"A woman's. Our friend's friend."

Pagan sat up, measuring the distance between the table and the man with the scythe.

"He's deaf. Tell me the whole tale, John; I am one of those who may know."

But while Fairfax told him everything, Pagan sat with a heart full of profound uneasiness, and a conscience that

was troubled. The lad was up to his neck in his own honour ; he would drown in it, and there was no one who could say him nay. He was no coward, but clean and strong in his calmness and in his wholesome morning hunger. It was impossible to speak of cowardice, of evasion, of compromise. That John would fight and be killed old Pagan had no doubt at all.

" You did well, John, very well. If Hargreaves is fit to fight——"

" He must have walked home, sir."

" I'm thinking how I would tackle the fellow. He is a stylist in the French bodkin fashion. I would slash at him, John, take him by surprise directly your swords are up. Don't give him a second."

" It's worth trying."

" I'll show you presently. I did it myself once, as a youngster against a Frenchman who was as clever as a needle. I had him in three seconds."

And so they talked as men do, casually, as though they were discussing a cock-fight, while the old spaniel went to sleep again and the mower spat on his hands. They talked for an hour. Old Pagan was full of confidence. Your Jeremiah is a poor friend when a man's back is against the wall.

Sitting there under the shade in that quiet garden Fairfax thought suddenly of Luce Paradell. Almost he had forgotten the child, but he thought of her in the great and growing seriousness of this affair of the heart. The little tremor of tenderness surprised him. He could see Luce standing in the bracken, looking out on life with the immense seriousness of her youth, holding out her hands and saying, " God be with you, John." He felt that he wanted to write her a letter ; it might be his last letter ; he did not try to deceive himself.

" May I write a letter, Uncle ? "

" Here is Purvis. Clear the table, Purvis, and bring us paper, ink and a quill."

He appeared to read his book while Fairfax scratched at the letter to Luce Paradell. It was a simple message he sent her, half playful yet touched with a half-conscious tenderness. He told her nothing of the affair of to-morrow.

"If I do not see you again, Luce, I should like you to have Bayard, my horse. He will carry you as well as he has carried me."

He glanced up and caught old Pagan looking at him over the top of his book. His uncle's eyes were full of a question that he did not like to ask.

"I always had my affairs in order, John."

Fairfax understood.

"Mine are in order, sir. Old Pegler of Guildford has my will in his strong-box."

He had finished the letter and sealed it when Purvis reappeared.

"Two gentlemen to see Mr. Fairfax, sir."

Pagan put down his book. John pushed the letter to him across the table, a little significant act that touched the older man's heart.

"Purvis, bring the gentlemen here. And take Noll and his scythe out of the way."

Fairfax pushed back his chair and stood up.

"Will you do the talking, sir?"

"Leave it to me, John."

Hargreaves had sent Trevanion and Richard Harley. Purvis brought them across the grass. Sir Roger rose from his chair, and all four bowed to each other with great formality.

"Good morning, gentlemen."

"Good morning, sir. Our business is with Mr. Fairfax here."

It was Trevanion who acted as spokesman, lean, sardonic, his black nostrils and cruel mouth faintly amused.

"I think I understand your business, Mr. Trevanion. You come from Mr. Hargreaves?"

"We do, sir."

Pagan glanced at John.

"Leave us a moment, Nephew. Be seated, gentlemen."

Fairfax bowed and walked apart. Trevanion gave him a curt bow in return that was like the scornful peck of a bird. They sat down, Sir Roger Pagan behind the table, the others facing him, Harley straddling his chair as though riding a horse, Trevanion stiff and sombre. Fairfax went to the gravel path between the wall and a

flower-border, and walked up and down there. They talked quietly at the table. There was a moment when Fairfax heard Trevanion's voice rising towards a louder insolence, and he met the Cornishman's eyes looking at him with strange brutality. But Pagan's voice quieted that outburst.

"Let us have no cockatoo tricks, Mr. Trevanion; I am rather touchy about the ears."

Fairfax walked up and down. He could hear little of what was said, yet he had a feeling that these two men despised him. He kept glimpsing Trevanion's roving eye and the scorn of his black nostrils. This fellow was sceptical, aggressive; he seemed to be arguing a great deal, to be showing a legal cynicism, a mistrust that was insolent. Fairfax saw Pagan's eyebrows growing fierce.

He stood up, towering over the table.

"Then let it be understood, gentlemen, that we meet as arranged. Mr. Trevanion, I like that tongue of yours so little that if you use it to-morrow I shall give myself the pleasure of fighting you. Gentlemen, I wish you good day."

They rose and bowed. Trevanion swept a look at Fairfax. He smiled, and when he smiled the dark lines between his nose and the mouth grew blacker and more ironical.

"To-morrow, sir."

"To-morrow."

Fairfax crossed over to the table. He saw Purvis meet Trevanion and Harley and conduct them into the house. Pagan had picked up the quill and was scratching a few sentences on a sheet of paper.

"Leicester Fields, John, to-morrow at six. I will send a message to young Seymour."

He looked up at Fairfax with kind and steady eyes.

"How will you spend the day, John?"

Fairfax's nostrils were full of the scent of mown grass.

"I think I shall go out into the country," he said, "and lie under a hedge."

About ten o'clock in the morning, when Sir Roger Pagan had dressed himself in his court suit and was preparing to go to Whitehall, a black coach with yellow wheels

drew up outside his house. The leather curtains remained drawn, and a footman, jumping down, knocked at Sir Roger's door. Pagan was at his window.

"I expected her," he said. "Would to God I had a harder heart."

He went out at once into the street, Purvis and the footman standing back, and drawing one of the curtains, looked in at the woman who sat there in the shadow. She was dead white but very calm.

"Shall we speak here?"

She bent towards him, and her voice was almost inaudible.

"Or in my house?"

"It would be better."

He gave her his arm, and looking quickly up and down the street, led her across the footpath to the house.

"The garden is safer."

"Where you please. So you expected me?"

"Yes, madam, I expected you."

"What a world it is," she said, "what a damnable world!"

They crossed to the table under the lime tree and sat down there. She leant her elbows on the table and began to speak.

"You have seen him?"

"Yes. It is all arranged. Six o'clock to-morrow in Leicester Fields. I go with him."

She was greatly moved, and her emotion made her fierce.

"It must not happen. It must be prevented."

"My dear, and how?"

"Ah—how? Do you ask me how?"

"I do indeed. You saw him this morning. Did you try to dissuade him?"

"He would not listen, hear of it."

"Then do you think he would listen to me, even if I attempted it? Good God, I would have tried it, had it been possible. The boy must fight."

"He will be killed!"

"Oh, yes, he will be killed, and I think he knows it."

She sat rigid, staring. And again she began to speak,

slowly, jerkily, words like blood escaping from a wound, driven by each heart-beat.

"And I shall have killed him! I am not a bad woman, but life seems to go wrong. I cannot bear this; I ought not to have been persuaded. One ought to foresee things."

And then she smiled at him, a smile of tears.

"You see, he is such a child. He believes in things. He has not learnt to sneer. It is impossible that he should die, such a boy——"

"You are thinking of yourself."

"Am I? Oh, not wholly. Self colours all one's emotion; I know that. I should never forget this; it would be like a broken rib in my corsets, always chafing, making an ache. You see, even my simile is the simile of a woman. But I think too of him, because he has loved me—as men rarely love. There are women who would take his sacrifice and forget it in a week. I can't—I can't."

Pagan looked at her with great sadness.

"Life has us by the throat, Mrs. Barbara. What's to be done? Nothing. Would you have me tell John to play the coward? I could not do it, and he would not listen."

She answered him with passionate obstinacy.

"What can I do? But this must not happen. Honour! Oh, my God! Honour—in this world! Shall I strip myself and walk in the streets and say, 'See, here is a woman who is a strumpet——'?"

"And break the illusion? The boy is proud, he is going to his death with his head among the stars. Honour—yes, though it anguishes me, I hold to it. Men die; plagues kill them, old age, the sword. To-morrow the boy's blood will be upon the grass, and I shall salute it, and hold the memory of it sacred."

He stood up like an old soldier praying on the field before a battle. She hid her face for a moment, then rose and turned to go.

"You will not help me," she said; "but I say to you that it shall not happen."

CHAPTER XIII

THE King was playing tennis when a gentleman brought him a letter.

"Keep it, Soames, till the game is over."

"There is writing upon it, your Majesty, that says 'In the name of God, hasten.'"

"Is that so, Soames? Show me the handwriting upon the cover."

He looked at it, and, with no change of countenance, went on with the game. When he had won it he stood smiling, while a page brought his doublet and hat.

"That letter, Soames."

He walked a little apart, and breaking the seal, opened the paper and read it, and yet with an unconcern that had no appearance of being studied. The matter seemed so unimportant and so unabsorbing that Charles found time and inclination to watch the players in the new game, and to twit one of them over a muffed stroke.

He had read as follows :

"I must see you. It is life and death. Do not deny me this, for the matter is very near my heart. I am in my coach at the farther gate of the park—our park. I shall wait two hours."

Charles folded the paper, and carrying it openly in his hand, loitered for some minutes, watching the game. He beckoned to a gentleman who was standing near. "What, another new racket, my lord! Let me try the feel of it." He swung the racket, essayed a few wrist strokes, smiled, and handed it back. "Too heavy for my liking. Rackets should be like women, Richard, what!" He walked on, arch, casual, unconcerned. Several of his gentlemen gathered to follow him. He smiled, shrugged them off. "Watch the game," he said. "I'm going to have a bath."

At the entry he turned as though he had forgotten something, found Soames's eyes fixed on him, and beckoned him with the hand that held the paper.

Soames joined him instantly. He was one of the few men who knew the real heart of the King, and he had learnt how to watch and wait like a dog.

"Lead on into the park, Soames, by the nearest and most quiet way."

"There is the little gate by the cock-pit, sir."

"Good. I like you, Soames, I like you very well, man."

"Your Majesty's service is my life."

"And your common sense and your loyalty are my blessing, Soames. You will walk very close to me, Soames; we are deep in a gossip; we are so absorbed in it that we cannot be accosted. And we are looking for a coach with yellow wheels over by the Hyde Gate."

"Very good, sir."

They entered the park, and avoiding the main drives and paths, walked over the grass towards the gate on the north-west. A coach was waiting here, standing under the shade of a big tree, the curtains drawn, the coachman and footman waiting by the horses. The two men took no more notice of the King than if he had been a private gentleman.

Charles went up to the coach, Soames remaining a few yards away.

"Madam," he said, "I am here."

A hand drew back a corner of one of the curtains.

"I thank you for this. I must speak to you here."

"Wait."

Charles called Soames, and made a sign to the two men. They moved away from the horses and lay down under a tree.

"Stand by the horses, Soames; see that we are not disturbed."

The King lifted the curtain, stepped into the coach, and let the curtain fall again. He still had Barbara Rackstraw's letter in his hand. She had made room for him on the seat beside her, and he raised her right hand and kissed it.

"What is it, heart of mine?"

"I have come to save a man's life."

"Not mine?"

"Listen."

She told how Fairfax had saved their secret, and how

he and Hargreaves were to meet on the morrow. And Charles listened, holding her hands, his swarthy face growing fierce and thoughtful. He did not interrupt her, and he asked no questions.

"I cannot bear to have the boy killed," she said, "for I should feel his bloodstains on our love, dear. It must not happen."

He turned and looked into her eyes.

"You are always the woman whom I cannot help but love. And the lad did this for me and said nothing. There is a fineness in such silence."

He sat for a while in thought, frowning, a man whose whole life was a struggle against the violence and the ambitions of lesser men. A slow anger rose in him; his face seemed to flush and to darken.

"What a Pandora's box it is! A world of fanatical grocers and gentlemanly blackguards, profligates and plotters. If I have a secret, some forward devil will be ready to pick it out of its shell on the point of his sword. This is not going to be easy, Barbe."

"I am in such a state over it that I cannot think. I went to Sir Roger Pagan——"

"Yes, old Pagan?"

"He would do nothing. He did not even reproach me. He goes out to-morrow with young Fairfax to see him killed. Honour—honour before everything!"

"That is Pagan's pride, dear heart. Now, let's unravel the tangle. Oh, my God! if I could be a dull man in the country for a year, just you and I together."

"You would be bored."

"You think so!"

He lay back in his corner of the coach, still holding her hand and holding it firmly.

"What's to be done, dear?"

"Could it not be forbidden?"

"By me? And how should the gossip have reached me? If I meddle, as king, are there not a hundred clever fools who will be saying: 'Hallo, what's this? What is Pagan's youngster to the King? He blabbed to the King, did he? What's behind it? What is at the back of our friend Charles's mind? Who was the woman?"

What is she to the King ?' Oh, I know them so well, these polite friends. What are we but bones to be picked ?"

" Could nothing be done with the other man ?"

" Hargreaves ? No, that would be impossible. He is too dangerous. I'll have no such wasp in my apple."

" But—supposing—— Oh, what a choice we have !"

" Death or dishonour, eh ?"

She hung her head.

" Yes. I am not thinking what the world will say—that he was my lover, and that I shielded him. What does it matter what these profligates say ? All women are alike to them. You and I hold hands behind all the gossip and the slander of Whitehall. And so, it seems, I have to choose."

" Is that cowardly of me ?"

" No. Which shall it be—the young man's death or his dishonour ? Which shall I choose for him ? If he dies, there's an end of it. If he lives, he can go away ; the thing will heal itself, and you in time could make this debt of ours good to him."

Charles leant towards her.

" Barbe, choose life. I know how good a thing life is, I who have had to run and leave my good friends to be killed. What was it like, I say, after Worcester ? Had I any pride ? Hiding in any pot-house, in any hole, like a rat ! The King runs away, the men of honour and the plain soldiers stay and die. But even in those days I clung to life, though it was foul and bitter and cowardly. The bread may be mouldy, but it is bread."

She answered very softly.

" I wish him to live."

Charles raised her hand again and kissed it.

" So be it. But I would have it thorough. Supposing he is kidnapped to-night and taken to your house ? He will remain there some days, tied up, and out of danger. Have you the courage for that, Barbe ? Have you the courage to tell him the truth, to try and soften it, to persuade him to go back into the country for a year ?"

" I have the courage," she said.

He gave a shrug of the shoulders, then smiled.

" It would be so much easier and safer to let him be

killed. There speaks the cynic. A disastrous fate follows those who are too kind-hearted. The young man might embrace his shamed honour, fly in a fury, seem mad, and tell the truth."

"I wish him to live," she answered.

"And we gamble on his generosity?"

"I accept the risk. Yet—to think that our love is pushed to such a shift! Almost I wish that I were like one of those other women, notorious, open, in my great adventure. Why, I shall be like them in name, in reputation."

"Never!"

The man in him, that intense and almost fanatical soul that the world was never to know, caught and held her in its arms. He was greatly moved. He kissed her many times, and with a tenderness that was not of the flesh.

"My life, never! While I hold you I see the other man in myself, not the dissolute and amiable cynic that men think me. So we are to break the boy's heart?"

"Are hearts broken so easily?"

"When they are old and brittle. Most young hearts are hard. Mine was a bit of leather at three-and-twenty."

"But they recover—after a wound."

"Mine recovered from many wounds, and now you hold it in your hands."

He kissed her forehead, and they continued to talk for a while with the calmness of two lovers who had no secrets. She was to Charles what no man or woman had ever been—a passion, a sweet intimacy, a secret wisdom, a mistress yet a wife. He held her hands before taking leave of her.

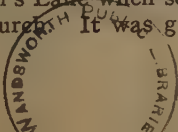
"You see what a good conceit I have of myself. If I were jealous of this young man——"

He drew back the curtain, stepped out, and let the curtain fall again.

"What orders? Home?"

"Yes, home," her voice answered him.

Fairfax had supped with his uncle and was walking back along St. Martin's Lane when someone spoke to him near St. Martin's Church. It was growing dark, and he



had been followed, but since there were many people in the part of the lane next to Charing Cross, Fairfax had not noticed a man walking behind him.

"Mr. Fairfax."

John swung round. A gentleman had come up with him, a man whose face was familiar even in the half light.

"Mr. Soames?"

"Yes. I was sent in search of you, and saw you come out of Sir Roger Pagan's. Will you accompany me, Mr. Fairfax?"

"You come from the——?"

Soames cut him short with a quick nod.

"Yes, that's it. We have not far to go, only across the way to the King's Mews."

John turned aside with him, knowing Soames to be one of the King's intimates. He had been expecting some such command, and he obeyed it unsuspectingly.

"You will see a coach standing in the yard, Mr. Fairfax."

"A coach?"

"Get into it. You understand?"

"I see. He will be in the coach."

Soames said nothing.

They entered the Royal Mews by a wicket that opened in the great gate, Soames going first, and closing the wicket when Fairfax had passed through. They walked up a lane and came to an open space with buildings on one side of it, and a coach standing close under one of the buildings, its pole jutting out like the bowsprit of a ship. There were no horses. A man was leaning against the wall at the back of the coach, but it was so dark now that Fairfax could not tell whether he was a gentleman or a groom.

Soames gave a cough. The man standing at the back of the coach rapped on the panel with his knuckles.

"This way, sir."

The man came round and raised the curtain for Fairfax to enter. It was pitch dark inside the coach, and as he lifted his foot to the steps, the man who had raised the curtain grappled him from behind, pinning John's arms. He pushed Fairfax forward. There were two other men in the coach, and between the three of them he was overpowered.

CHAPTER XIV

THERE had been thunder and heavy rain in the night, and the dawn came with the freshness and the beauty of a morning in May.

Fairfax had slept but little. He lay there in the darkness of a strange room, and watched the casement grow pale with the dawn. His hands were tied together, so were his feet. A man had sat all night beside the bed, a man who had yawned prodigiously, but had refused to talk. When daylight came the man got up and went out, bolting the door outside. Fairfax heard him descending the stairs.

Fairfax lay very still. There was a mattress under him, and pillows, and they had lashed his wrists and ankles with scarves so that his flesh should not be hurt. He remembered the struggle in the darkness of the coach, and three patient men handling him as though he were a passionate and refractory child.

"We don't want to hurt thee, lad. Take it quiet, take it quiet." He remembered his own angry cry before they could gag him : "Damn you, you can hurt my body, but let my honour alone."

The anger had gone out of him. It seemed to have slipped away in the night like water dripping from a leaking crock. He had felt as though something in him was bleeding to death. He had been astonished, puzzled by his own apathy. When the daylight came he lay and stared at the window and at the ceiling overhead. He saw that he was in a big room hung with old tapestry, the ceiling whitened between the beams. The bed-curtains were of chintz, the oak posts fluted and carved. There were curtains of the same chintz hanging at the windows, pink tulips on a white ground. A bird-cage clock stood on a table near the bed ; Fairfax had heard its ticking in the night, ticking away his honour. He could see the

brass dial now as he lay. The hands stood at half-past five. Old Pagan and Seymour would be knocking at Honeyman's door.

And he was not angry; that was the thing that astonished him. He lay and watched the hands of the clock move slowly towards the hour; he could see those men waiting in Leicester Fields; Hargreaves arrogant and angrily amazed, Trevanion with his scornful nostrils, old Pagan white and proud as a corpse. It was over; they would be going home. The hands of the clock moved on, and Fairfax became aware of a wild voice in him that burst into laughter. He could not resist the impulse; the part of him that resisted seemed to have died in the night. He lay there and laughed and laughed like an hysterical woman who has been outraged, or like a sot whose ridiculous soul flaps like the wings of a scarecrow.

Quite suddenly he was shocked by his own laughter, this meaningless noise that was without mirth. He lay very still, trying to understand what had happened to him. What part of him was it that had laughed? How was it that his romantic soul was not struggling, cursing, wriggling with heroic fury, calling on his outraged honour? His manhood seemed pulp. Something had gone out of it.

And then he fell on the edge of his understanding into a complete realization of his own shame. He was ridiculous; everything about him was ridiculous; even the voice of his inner self had been laughing at its own absurdities. This mock-hero tied up like a cold fowl, saved from his own heroics, while other men went home—laughing! The starch had fallen out of his pride, and yet he felt so sick, so flatly humiliated that he could not raise even a hiccough of anger.

About seven o'clock he heard footsteps on the stairs. The door was unbolted, and a lackey came into the room, carrying Fairfax's sword and hat. He placed them on the chest by the window, went out again and returned with a jug of hot water, and a basin in which lay a razor, a cake of soap, and a shaving-brush. He carried a clean towel over his arm.

The man was very suave, very polite, moving about with the softness of a well-trained servant, his face flat and expressionless.

"Will you be shaved, sir?"

Fairfax tried to sit up, but a folded sheet had been drawn over his body and fastened under the bed.

"Allow me, sir."

The lackey untied the scarves about Fairfax's ankles and wrists and removed the sheet. He did not look once into Fairfax's face, but Fairfax looked at him dully, sulkily. The man had a wart on his chin, out of which three black bristles protruded.

"Now, sir."

Fairfax stretched himself and sat up with his legs out of the bed. The lackey spread a towel over his shoulders, arranged the basin, hot water, razor and soap on a side-table, and proceeded to lather the gentleman and to shave him. Then he brought a comb and a little mirror out of a pocket, held the mirror for Fairfax, who was dabbing his chin with the towel.

"No blood, sir. You will have your hair combed from the middle, sir?"

"You can give me the comb."

"Just as you please, sir. May I have your doublet and shoes?"

Fairfax sat and combed his hair, while the fellow brushed his doublet and hat, cleaned his shoes and polished his sword. They did not exchange a single word. Fairfax felt that he could bear no one near him; he wanted to be alone.

The lackey went off with the basin and towel, but paused at the door.

"Will you have ale or wine, sir, with your breakfast?"

"Wine."

"Very good, sir."

He closed the door and went down the stairs.

Fairfax was up instantly and standing at the window. He saw and he understood. The window looked out on a garden with a stone path that led to a gate in a yew hedge. Ten feet below and to the left were the tiles of

a porch. It was the house of Barbara Rackstraw in which he had passed the night.

Fairfax turned away from the window and began to wander round the room like a man in pain. He paused by the fireplace, leant his elbows on the mantelshelf, and remained motionless, his forehead touching the wall. The clock went on ticking; he heard a light wind in the trees; the curtain rings made a little clinking sound; a starling chattered on the roof. And Fairfax stood there with a heart that was empty, his manhood cold to the marrow, conscious of his ridiculousness, his humiliation, and of nothing else.

Footsteps were coming up the stairs. He turned sharply, and went and stood at the window with his back to the room. The lackey came in with a tray. He set it down on the table.

"His honour is served."

Fairfax felt a thickness in his throat. The fellow's politeness mocked him. He remained standing by the window.

"My lady sends you a message, sir."

"Well?"

"She would see you, sir, when you have breakfasted."

"Where?"

"In the music-room, sir."

The man went out.

Fairfax ate hardly any breakfast. He was thinking of that interview and whether it could possibly be avoided, for though she had been the cause of his humiliation, he was in no temper to utter reproaches. His love seemed to have died with his pride; he neither hated nor loved. Nothing on earth seemed to matter.

He sat there for an hour before he could raise sufficient determination to go downstairs into that room where she was waiting; and when he did go it was a mere drift, an act of fatalism. He paused for a moment outside the door and then knocked, and his knock was the knock of a lackey.

"Come in."

Barbara Rackstraw was sitting at the far end of the room near the window. She did not rise to meet him,

or make any movement of welcome, but went on with some sewing that she had in her lap. This last picture of her was the picture of a woman, very calm, very gentle, very sad, a woman who knew that she had broken an illusion, as all illusions are broken, this day or the next.

"Well, John?"

She looked up at him with a quick mother look.

"Come and sit by me. I do not ask to be forgiven."

He stood holding the door, limp, swarthy, sombre, as though not knowing what to do. He could not bring himself to look at her. When he closed the door he closed it very softly, like a man who was cowardly and careful by nature. He walked forward awkwardly into the room, put his sword and hat on a chair, and then did not know what to do with his hands. He tried clasping them behind his back, but felt no happier.

And the woman saw it all; she understood, and her eyes gave a little momentary staré of horror, compassion, remorse. She bent again over her work, knowing that she had taken away this man's self-respect. Was it possible to recreate it? She wondered. His helplessness, his sheepish, shamed futility hurt her.

"Sit down, John."

He sat down like a servant in the presence of his mistress.

"Why aren't you angry with me, John?"

"Angry?"

His eyes were the eyes of an inarticulate boy.

"I have not any right to be angry."

She looked at him quickly, almost tragically.

"Oh, my dear! Have I done that? I had to choose, and I chose that you should—live."

"It doesn't matter," he said.

"Why not matter?"

"I suppose the man gets the clothes that fit him. If he's a pup, and quarrels with a grown dog, he has to be picked up by his mistress and taken home."

She bowed her head.

"I do not look at it like that! I wish you would be angry with me, John."

He sat and stared at the work in her lap.

"I cannot be angry. A man who feels ridiculous cannot be angry with other people. He is angry with himself."

"Do you wish that I had let that man kill you?"

"That too would have been ridiculous. I see it now, I feel like a man who has been drunk, and is sober. I am a silly farmyard fowl that thought it could come to town and hold its own with gamecocks. And you tied me by the legs and pitched me into a coop."

She put her work aside and sat regarding him with steady and compassionate eyes. Men are the creatures of a suggestive vanity; courage and all the attributes of manhood are the plants that grow from the soul of a man's wholesome self-conceit. She had taken away Fairfax's pride, and he had wilted in a night. The very voice of him was different, his face a sullen and flaccid caricature of the face of yesterday.

"What have I done to you, John?"

He thought a moment.

"I think you have shown me myself, and the hollowness of things."

"And yet I think of you with admiration. You were ready to give up your life, and I, in my fear for you, have taken away what you call your honour. And yet you are the same man to me, and to the King."

He stared at the floor.

"But I am not the same man to myself. I don't understand it at all; at first I was angry, and then my anger went; I began to laugh at everything. Yesterday I felt like a hero; this morning I seem to know that I was a fool. I thought I could carry things through—things that were too big for me. I shall go back to the country."

She rose and came and stood over him with her hand on his shoulder.

"If we tell the truth, John, will that bring back those heroic moments? I will go and proclaim it if you wish. I will go to this man Hargreaves and tell him that it was not cowardice—that I played the trick on you, that you are a man of honour and will fight."

He still stared at the floor.

"It would make no difference—now," he said heavily.

"And why?"

"Because what you have done has made me despise myself. I was like a silly child that had to be taught a lesson. I was of so little use, so helplessly out-matched, that you had not the heart to let me fight. I should have been killed; my uncle knew it, and I think I knew that he knew it, but that did not hurt me. I dare say I should have gone down bravely. But when you had to come and pull my life out of the fire, then I realized how poor a thing I was, unfit even to meet that bully."

She did not withdraw her hand.

"So you will go back to the country, John."

"Yes."

"And then——?"

"Hide myself—become a book-worm, a squire."

"Oh, my dear, this will not last. I shall take care that the truth is known; we do not forget so easily, and some day you will come back."

"To fight Hargreaves—perhaps."

"Do all your thoughts still run on that?"

"How can I help it? The thought of that man will always stand like the Angel of the Lord in front of the Balaam's Ass of my ambition. I could never show my face at Court until I had fought him."

"You are very obstinate, John."

"No, I am logical."

He looked up at her suddenly and smiled like a sick child.

"A man can only heal himself, you know; I am learning these things. And now I'll go."

He rose, and as she withdrew her hand from his shoulder she realized that he was telling the truth. His obstinate humiliation was such that the passion to escape was a slow fever in him, a sickness that asked to be hidden, to lose itself in the quiet obscurity of the woods and fields.

"John, I have broken your heart."

She gave him her hand and he bent and kissed it, yet almost without emotion.

"No. Perhaps you have taught me that my heart was too soft. If ever I travel again I shall remember this shipwreck."

CHAPTER XV

F AIRFAX walked out of the house and into the lane with a stoicism that accepted its own shame. He was showing the same stubbornness that he had displayed but yesterday, when he had held his tongue and prepared to sacrifice himself to Teg Hargreaves's sword. He paused and stood for a moment looking at the place in the hedge where he had left Hargreaves lying. The bent twigs and crushed nettles and grasses were just the same, and yet he had a feeling that that struggle had taken place in some other world, a world of strange heroisms and wild self-deception, an enchanted world full of perfumes and music. He had come out of it cold, cold as a celibate.

He smiled faintly and walked on.

"I suppose they made use of me," was his thought.

He held to that piece of cynicism till his own sincerity qualified it.

"Damn it, I had my chance! I was used till they found that I was a brittle weapon, and then out of pity they saved me from being broken. Have I any right to complain? But—pity!"

He walked on angrily.

"Pity! It is like some other man's spittle on your face. Good God!"

He made an almost involuntary gesture, as though wiping a stain from his face. And then he laughed. This stain was not skin deep. It was in the marrow of his manhood, in the core of his secret thoughts. Pity! Could there be anything more damnable, more loathsome, more ridiculous? Pity!

His new obstinacy stiffened. He walked along the lanes towards Westminster, adapting himself and his plans to the new mood. An hour ago he had thought

of disappearing into the country without attempting an explanation, of walking all the way to Shere and of writing to Pagan from his own house. The thought of facing Honeyman and his lackey had frightened him, but he was frightened no longer ; he was stubborn.

He decided that he would go to his lodging, settle with Honeyman, order his heavy baggage to be packed and to be sent to the carriers for collection. He could write a letter to old Pagan and fee Honeyman to deliver it. His horse was stabled in an alley at the back of the Strand, and he would be on the Guildford road before noon, riding away in broad daylight with his back to Whitehall.

But matters fell out in a fashion that contradicted all his expectations. He was to see neither Honeyman nor his lodging, nor was he to write a letter or to mount his horse. Coming down Cockspur Street, he saw a tall man lean out of a window of the "Red Lion," a man whose eyes seemed to harden like the eyes of an astonished bird of prey. It was Trevanion—"Scorn"—black of nostril and brutal of mouth.

Trevanion swung back into the room, and Fairfax could hear his voice speaking. A hubbub followed. He passed the doorway of the "Red Lion"—not hurrying because of his stubbornness—and as he passed it he had a glimpse of a passage crowded with young men, swords, plumed hats, excited faces, all pushing towards the doorway. Fairfax walked on. He guessed what was going to happen to him, but he did not flinch.

"Hallo, there—Pagan's Pup !"

"Tarry a minute, sweet soul."

"Mr. White Liver, a word with you."

They came after him, a dozen of them or more, and Fairfax turned. He was very white ; his face looked drawn and strangely old.

He found Trevanion in front of him, a Trevanion who held the stage.

"No, hold back, gentlemen ! I want this fellow to explain why he fetched some of us out of bed at five in the morning and left his own friends standing like fools."

Fairfax seemed to grow even whiter.

"I do not explain."

"Indeed! That's curious, rather eccentric. Well, I stand here and call you a coward."

"Thank you. Will you fight?"

"Fight!" Trevanion's face was brutal, ironical. Then he burst out laughing.

"No, we do not fight with you! That privilege has gone, my dung-cock. Take his sword away, some of you."

It was done, and Fairfax did not resist.

"Now, little man, may I ask you where you were going on this beautiful summer morning?"

"Home."

Fairfax snapped it out like a curse.

"Home! And where is that?"

"The country."

The whole crowd of them burst out laughing.

"The country, by gad!"

"Oh, dear heart, back to the milk-pails!"

But Trevanion was possessed by a devil.

"Gentlemen, what shall we do with this coward?"

"Duck him," said one.

"Start him on the way to the country."

Trevanion turned and held up his hand. At the gate of the yard belonging to the "Red Lion" stood a donkey that had been carrying a load of sea-coal in its panniers. The panniers were empty, and the donkey-man was standing by his animal, drinking a mug of ale. Trevanion began to smile.

"Go and tell that fellow, Fatty, that we will have his donkey for an hour, to take a gentleman out of town."

Two of them went and argued with the man of the tankard. He demanded a crown, and a drink at the end of the journey.

"But for a gentleman, you say? My moke's all coal-dust."

"That is as it should be. This gentleman is eating dirt."

They came back to Trevanion.

"We have hired the fiery charger."

Trevanion grimaced.

"Take him into the yard. Come along, you."

They closed round Fairfax and swept him through the yard gates, one white face in a bunch of red ones.

Half an hour later the people in the street saw a queer procession moving in the direction of Hyde Park. A young man, naked save for his breeches, sat on a donkey with his feet tied together under the beast's belly, and his face towards the tail. On his back and chest were two black C's that had been daubed on with a tar brush. The donkey-man went a little ahead, leading the donkey. In the rear marched about a dozen gentlemen, who seemed to be very merry.

At the corner where St. James's Street joined the main road the procession met a country coach that was moving very slowly. A girl's head appeared at the window, her eyes looking at the man on the donkey.

"John!"

Another face appeared, the fresh and pleasantly pink face of a gentleman of five-and-forty. He, too, looked at Fairfax, seemed shocked and amazed, and pulled the girl back into the darkness of the coach.

She sat rigid, staring.

The man on the donkey rode on.

PART II

CHAPTER XVI

A BRISK-LOOKING man in black pulled up his nag by the porch of Shere Hall, and seeing a boy weeding one of the borders, beckoned to him with his crop.

"Hallo, there! Is the squire at home?"

"Don't hardly know, sir."

"Then fetch me Mr. Garret."

The boy wiped his hands upon his breeches and ran, for this brisk old man on the bay horse was Mr. Pegler of Guildford. While the boy was in search of Mr. Garret, the steward, Mr. Pegler sat stiffly on his horse, brushing the flies away from the animal's neck and ears, and looking about him with an alertness that missed nothing. He noticed that one of the gables needed a patch of plaster, and that two panes of glass were broken in the casement of the bedroom over the porch. Mr. Pegler was a man of detail, and of insatiable curiosity. His long nose and chin seemed to be carrying on a running commentary upon life across the narrow alley of his mouth, like two old women craning across at each other from two windows. "What—what—what's that? Bless my soul! Did he now? You don't say so! What's that? Well, I told you so."

Garret came out in a hurry, a plethora after dinner on a hot day in September. He was buttoning the lower buttons of a brown doublet, but his full, round, florid face still looked unbuttoned and fresh from its nap.

"Won't you come down, sir? Mr. John ain't in. His dinner's been waiting."

"Waiting, has it! So has my stomach, Garret."

"You will take a snack, Mr. Pegler? The master is out with a hawk he is training."

Mr. Pegler dismounted with the lightness of a young man, and leaving the bay horse with the boy, followed Garret into the house. He had known Shere Hall for thirty years, and he could have counted the changes in it on the fingers of his hand. There was a little more comfort in it, a little more colour, a little more luxury. A gate-legged table had taken the place of the slab of oak on four posts that had served the Fairfaxes since Shere had been built. There were cushions covered with blue linen in the window-seat, a number of books lying about, a hawk's perch and tray between the great window and fireplace. The table was laid for dinner, and there were dishes of cold meat and fruit and a jug of ale on the side-table by the door.

"Sit you down, Mr. Pegler, sir. I will have another place laid for the master. What is it to be, some cold beef and a salad?"

"What's in that jug, Garret? Ale?"

"Ale it is."

"Ale! By Jove! Convey me a good mug of that, my friend. Deuce take these new-fangled tables; they are all legs!"

"Knocked your knee, sir?"

"Right on the patella, Garret."

"What's that, sir?"

"Knee-cap, Garret; but we men of the learned professions have to earn our money with big words. Bless me, a little Latinity brings in the guineas. What, you are carving for me!"

"A pleasure, Mr. Pegler. Do you like it red?"

"Red, with a bit of white fat as big as my two fingers. You'll keep me company?"

"I could do with a glass of ale. These hot days make me muzzy."

Garret went and sat in the window-seat, where he could watch the road, and he sipped his ale while Mr. Pegler ate. The lawyer dealt with his food as he dealt with all the other affairs of life, briskly and methodically, cutting the meat

into symmetrical strips, and adding a fragment of fat to each lean piece before raising the fork to his mouth. He looked at everything in the room, and noted it as though he were making an inventory.

"Have any visitors here these days, Garret?"

"Not a living soul, sir, save the parson, and he came but once. Mr. Fairfax quarrelled with him."

"Keeps his hawk in the dining-room, does he?"

"It seems to be an interest, sir. He's interested in nothing but that bird and these books."

"Books! . . . It ought to be women at his age. But then, of course, there's a reason."

The two men looked at each other with a certain eagerness, as though neither of them was quite sure whether the other was too loyal or too shrewd to gossip.

"That was a bad business, sir."

"Lord, Garret, I have known affairs that were like rotten fish compared to it. He is still taking it badly, hey?"

"He sees nobody, Mr. Pegler. He's out all day in the woods or on the downs, or lying in the garden with a book under his chin. He's uncommon quiet, you might say gentle."

"Well, I have always been a friend of the family," said the lawyer reassuringly; "but how did the tale get about?"

Garret's round, jocund face grew suddenly malevolent.

"I could smell it to earth. It was that white-faced woman on the hill."

"What, Lady Paradell?"

"I'd swear to it. She knew of it somehow, and in a week every slut in Fernhurst had the tale at the end of her tongue. Damn all women—damn them blue."

"Now what did she do that for? There's a reason, a reason for everything."

"Miss Luce has put her hair up."

"My God, Garret, it's the girl! Of course."

They gossiped no further on Fairfax's affairs, for Garret had heard the sound of a horse's hoofs, and Fairfax appeared from under the shadow of the beech trees. He had the peregrine on his wrist, hooded and belled, the hood

coloured red and green, the bells of silver. Garret went out to meet him.

"Mr. Pegler is here, sir, and I sat him down to some dinner."

To Fairfax the news seemed of no importance.

"Quite right, Garret. Send Jerry out, will you?"

He entered the house, and crossed the hall into the dining-room where Pegler was standing by the window. Fairfax glanced at him, gave him a "Good day, Mr. Pegler," and going to the hawk's perch lifted the bird from his wrist to the perch. He knotted the leash to the pole, removed his glove, and stood stroking the bird very gently with the tip of his right forefinger.

"A fine bird, sir," said the lawyer.

Fairfax went on stroking the falcon. He hardly seemed aware of Mr. Pegler's presence, and his face was extraordinarily grave and tranquil. And Pegler watched him, for he was as interested in men as he was in inanimate things. It seemed to him that Fairfax was no longer a young man. He made the lawyer think of some mellow bachelor of fifty, pottering about among his books and flowers, content with a dog and an old horse, and all the quiet life that has lost love and ambition. But there were lines on Fairfax's forehead, a little V of wrinkles between the eyebrows, a knot of effort that the soul of him had often to retie.

"I came to see you about Poppinghole Farm, sir."

"Poppinghole? Yes. Sit down, Mr. Pegler."

A servant entered the room with clean trenchers, a mug, and a knife and fork on a tray. Fairfax looked at him over his shoulder.

"Have you the bird's dish, Tom?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bring it here."

Fairfax drew the curtains across the window, and then unhooded the falcon in the half light of the room. He proceeded to feed her with bits of raw meat from a saucer, making certain soft sounds with his lips and tongue. Mr. Pegler sat down and remained silent, for he saw that Fairfax was absorbed in attending to the bird. The training of a falcon had its ritual; it was a delicate, patient

business, of far more importance to Fairfax than the lease of Poppinghole Farm.

"That is enough, Jess."

He stroked the bird's head, replaced the hood, and, drawing back the curtains, washed his hands in a basin of water that the man Tom had brought him.

"Have you dined, Mr. Pegler?"

"Very well, sir."

"Good."

Fairfax sat down to his dinner, and dismissed the servant.

"Now, Pegler, what is it?"

"I rode over to make certain proposals about the new lease, sir."

"I am listening."

He sat and ate, slowly and with an air of not noticing the food on his trencher, and while Pegler got through his business, Fairfax's eyes kept watching Jess on her perch. He made an occasional remark, asked a few questions, but his thoughts were elsewhere, and far away from Pegler and the farm.

When he had finished the meal, he got up and stood stroking Jess with a feather he took from a bowl on the window-seat. He had the sad, tranquil, serious eyes of a hermit, a man who had withdrawn himself into quiet places, and who was schooling himself to look for nothing but the shadows in the woods, the passing of clouds in the sky, the life of the birds and the beasts, the flashing of dew on a rose.

"That will satisfy me, Mr. Pegler."

He picked up a book that lay on the floor, looked at it, and then put it carefully with some others in a book-slide on a table.

The lawyer rose to go. He was a man of detail and the detail had been satisfied.

"You never come to Guildford now, sir, and give me the pleasure of dining with you?"

Fairfax looked at him without a smile.

"Why, no; I go nowhere. Jess, and the horses and these books take up such a lot of my time."

"A pleasant, tranquil life, Mr. Fairfax."

But John had grown vague again, and was watching something out of the window.

The lawyer took leave of him, and, mounting his horse, rode off across the park ; and Fairfax, going out into the garden, lay down under a tree and went to sleep.

This quietism of his seemed as natural as the life about him, this browsing of cattle in a green valley, and if Mr. Pegler was deceived by it he was excused by the very fact that this valley mood had deceived John Fairfax himself. Over his bed hung a paper fastened to the wall, on which he had written the words : " Thou Fool." In the early days when he had looked at it each morning there had been a burning heat at his heart, a tightening of the muscles of the lower jaw, a slight deepening of his breathing, but now he could read the words quite calmly and with no anger against himself. He walked or rode many miles each day. He saw nobody but Garret and the servants. His dog, his horse and Jess were his friends. He read and wrote much poetry, lost himself in books, and on clear nights he sat in the garden and studied the stars. Deliberately, and with great effort, he had been making his life a monastic affair, and reducing it to such a Cistercian thoroughness that it included his body as well as his mind. He made a habit of working with his hands. He scythed grass, dug, spent hours tying up lettuces with a meticulous care that made his two gardeners think him a little mad. He had passed a year in Holland, and caught a Dutchman's love for tulips and the topiary training of trees, and he had a little family of yews which he was clipping into the shapes of ducks, peacocks, pyramids, castles and ball-capped pillars. He spent wet days in cataloguing his library, and began a day-book in which he collected little tags of philosophy and oddments of ancient wisdom. He was very serious ; he never smiled ; his sense of humour had gone to sleep.

Such was John Fairfax after that disastrous first venture of his into the world of Whitehall.

He had begun to think himself a philosopher, while the truth of it was that he had drowned himself in dullness. He lay at the bottom of a green pond where neither the winds nor the heats of life could touch him. All his old

stubbornness remained. He had made up his mind to teach himself to despise the very things that he had failed to accomplish. It was pride turned hermit, passion dosing itself with flat draughts of ditch-water, and then boasting itself the captain of a water-logged barge sunk in a back end.

Nothing human ever happened to John Fairfax, for the simple reason that he did not suffer it to happen. His philosophy and his religion were mere negatives, elaborate self-denials.

He slept all the afternoon. From five to six he read the "Jerusalem Delivered" of Torquato Tasso. At six a mug of mild ale and a biscuit were brought him. At a quarter-past six he walked out into the park, and became lost in its green, slumbering beauty. For he allowed himself to dip both hands into the beauty of this green world, these beech woods, these quiet meadows where the willows made a soft sad mist, these little woodland valleys deep with fern. It was a solace to him, this beauty, an opiate, a sanctuary. Like many men who have suffered disappointment and shame, he imagined that he could make trees his friends, and grow sentimental over flowers instead of loving women.

Life pulled at his heart that evening, and tore aside for a moment the old man's coat in which he had dressed his youth. He was idling along the sandy ridge above the valley where Scots firs rose from sheets of fern and heather when he came to a sudden pause and stood very still. He had been following a grass path that ended in a lane on the edge of the hamlet of Shere, and on a bank beside the path Fairfax saw a girl and a lad lying in the bracken, kissing. The happy, physical abandonment of these lovers sent him to the rightabout, but for a long while he could not forget the vividness of it, the girl with her closed eyes and head thrown back showing a white, exultant throat.

He was savage with his own youth for uttering an inarticulate cry of jealousy and pain. As a philosopher and a man who had grown almost prudish he struck it in the face.

"You fool!"

He wandered back into the beech woods, and sitting

down under a great tree looked down between the grey trunks at the valley that was on fire with the sunset. There was no movement in the canopy of leaves overhead. The place was utterly and completely still.

But Fairfax's youth still whispered.

"Even the beauty of it is so sad," it said.

The philosopher would have none of this foolishness.

"How can beauty be sad? What more do you deserve than such a landscape as this? God made it."

"But He also made those lovers," said the other voice.

The philosopher was angry, perhaps because he was troubled and afraid.

"Young animals, no more and no less. Be superior to your passions."

"But—I am passion!" cried his youth, "and I am lonely, and when the leaves fall and the mud comes, what are you going to do with me?"

"You will spend the evenings by the fire," said the philosopher, "writing beautiful things in my day-book."

His youth uttered a shout of dismay.

"Writing of beautiful things! I want to *be* them."

"Shut up, you fool!"

The philosopher closed down the hatches on the argument.

He sat there till dusk fell, and a little chilliness seemed to exude from the masses of black leaves above. The grass in the fields would soon be wet with dew. The hills in the west were the colour of violet against the pale gold of the afterglow.

Fairfax rose. The philosopher in him was caught in a moment of candour.

"Yes, it is sad," was his thought, "most exquisitely sad. Even that valley has its eyes full of ears."

CHAPTER XVII

IF life's entanglement and tragedy is woman, and if at the best a man can but make terms with Nature, then the dullness of a dull marriage may be commended, provided that children come of it, and the passion of parentage displaces the seductions of Solomon.

The Paradells were at their London house in King Street, Westminster; Luce with her hair up, Sir Philip on the verge of a sickness that was to bring him slowly to his death, his lady more restless than ever, and hating men because their eyes had begun to pass her over. This cold woman had concealed in her coldness the enigma of a secret licentiousness. She was a bad mother for any child, an execrable mother for such a girl as Luce.

These two still contended for the soul of their child, Luce of the black hair and the red, passionate mouth; Luce, whose eyes were truth in a wilderness, this child of impulses, ideals, prides, tendernesses. For there was nothing small in the girl, nothing mean. She was very vital, very strong, almost fierce in her loves and her hates, tragic in her disillusionments. She would be a beautiful instrument with deep tones and a richness of compass, a rare gamut of human strings for life to play upon, but for the moment the emphasis was on the simpler notes. Her youth was still direct and frankly unsubtle, and her father had tried to keep it so.

John Fairfax had fallen. The great man-boy was a memory that still hurt Luce, and made her hot with a kind of secret shame.

Her mother had made sure of the death of that illusion. She had laughed, and laughter is the most damning of all criticisms.

"Like March, my dear. In like a lion, out like a lamb. Send a man to London to find his level."

Yet there were parts of the episode that she made a great show of concealing, knowing that her reticence would do Fairfax the greatest disservice. She drew a curtain, a sinister curtain, and put a motherly hand in front of Luce's eyes.

"My dear, there are some things that one does not talk about to a girl of your age. This very scandalous affair cannot be discussed."

Paradell himself seemed to have been rendered inarticulate by John's disaster, and to have surrendered to his wife. Already he was a sick man, a man who asked to be comforted and who had no energy to spare for the solving of other people's problems. He was weakening in the long struggle for Luce's soul, and in a sense he humbled himself before his wife, and accepted her ambitions, making a tacit treaty with her so that his last months with Luce might not be months of battle. He thought that he could influence the girl, and Catharine Paradell let him think so. She knew that she would have the last word.

Of the life of the Court Luce saw little. The Paradells belonged to a constellation of county families—the Massinghams, Aubreys, Lidcotes—who were a little Elizabethan and archaic, and who dined and met among themselves and were mistrustful of the new age, nor did Catharine Paradell desire that Luce should see too much. She suffered the girl to gain little brilliant glimpses of the greater world, and the pictures were carefully chosen by the mother. A dance at the Earl of Petersham's, an occasional state drive in the park, service at the Chapel Royal or St. Paul's. Luce was allowed to look at life from a gallery, to see all its colour and movement, its splendid foppery, its gallantry that appeared romantic when viewed at a distance. She was not allowed to hear what was said, nor to discover the one great innuendo that lurked in the language of that luxurious world. Luce was romantic, fiercely and wilfully romantic. Besides, the girl had not yet reached the season of her blooming; she was to be a beauty, but she was still somewhat angular, too obviously long and boyish in the leg, and ready to overflow with impetuous enthusiasms.

The Paradells were to go down to Fernhurst for Christmas, and the great black coach spent two days wallowing

in mud-holes and ruts that were like ditches. It rained. The landscape was a thing of slime, a surface that oozed moisture and exuded fog. Somewhere beyond Esher they broke a pole, and were held up in a very miserable inn. Paradell had begun to be in pain, the first gnawings of the disease that was to destroy him. He lay in bed with a hot brick wrapped in flannel, and Luce—coming and going—in a fever to help. The second stage of the journey was made through a raw fog. Fernhurst Park looked as though it had been submerged under the sea, and had been heaved up to welcome them. You expected stranded leviathans floundering big-bellied in great squelches of mud. The house was full of roaring fires, small half circles of warmth in spaces of chilly gloom.

Paradell spent his Christmas Day in his bedroom. He was in pain, and Luce sat with him during the morning; my lady had ordered the coach and gone to church. At ten o'clock it began to rain. The gutter above Sir Philip's window was clogged with leaves, and water overflowed there, and fell in a melancholy drip past the casement on to the flagstones of the terrace. The dripping water irritated Paradell and depressed him.

"That is beyond my patience, Luce."

Luce went for the housekeeper. A groom and a gardener were fetched, a ladder obtained, and the gutter cleared of leaves, Luce sitting at the window and watching little beads of wetness collect on the gardener's grey worsted stockings.

"This is a poor country, Luce, in the winter."

The ladder and the men had gone, and Paradell lay looking at the grey casement. It was so blurred with rain that he could see nothing of the landscape, but he could imagine it and that was sufficient. The fog of the English melancholy was in his throat, the melancholy that is apparent to those who are sick and to all who are sensitive and not drugged with labour, beef or beer. Paradell had long felt the essential sadness of this grey, green land, a land of patient human cattle. The more active and enterprising animals so ordered their lives that they escaped from it; they became men of affairs, scholars, courtiers, sportsmen, and eluded the English melancholy by being always in action.

"I remember once, when I was in Italy, before you were born——"

He began to speak of Italy, and Luce sat and listened. She was strong and healthy, and had all the red-blooded optimism of youth, but her father's voice saddened her. It had the little complaining and pathetic note of a wind wandering through the spaces of a house. He spoke of the boat to Dunkirk, the long journey across Northern France, Paris, the gradual unfolding of the yellow south, that wonderful road between the mountains and the sea, the sunlight, the vines, the cypresses, the great breadths of blue, that warming of the senses and of the soul. And suddenly his thoughts came back to England, to the grey grime of the Dover cliffs on a December day, the dirty roads, the brown splurge of the fields, the stench of wet dung being carted, the smell of staleness in the inns. Luce's thoughts travelled with his, though she had not his experience or his vision, and Paradell's thoughts got stuck suddenly in the other side of the downs. He found himself looking down into a green hole in the earth where an old house stood, and sent the reek from its chimneys into the bare tops of the elms and the beeches.

He wondered suddenly what Fairfax was making of life. A little stab of pity joined itself to the pain under his ribs. Fairfax had struck foul weather early in his career.

"Last Christmas Day but one——" he began.

Luce glanced round quickly. His thoughts had spread to her like sparks to tinder. Her dark eyes seemed to glow.

"John was with us," she said. And then of a sudden her face grew virginal and austere.

"Poor John," said the man in the bed.

They were silent awhile. Paradell was thinking that he had surrendered too easily, bargained for peace of soul, and deserted a man in the moment of shipwreck. He knew all that had happened. Sir Roger Pagan had told him. John had gone down to the illusion of romance.

"I did do something—I wrote to him," he said, as though trying to satisfy himself.

Then he added: "John returned my letter."

Luce's face remained austere.

● "Perhaps he was right to return your letter. He has buried himself over there. It is cowardly."

Her father rose on one elbow.

"I never thought you hard, child."

She sat looking out of the window.

"What is hardness, dear? . . . I only know what you and Mother have told me. If I had been John Fairfax I would rather have died."

"Sometimes it is harder to live," said the man in the bed. "Good God! And with the green mould crawling over one!"

Luce's eyes softened; but it was because of her father, and not because of John. She got up and went and sat beside the four-post bed.

"You are in pain, still?"

"No."

He smiled at her. All his pleasant pinkness had gone; his lower eyelids were like bladders, and his nose looked pinched.

"No, not that pain. But any sort of pain takes the hardness away from a man. I wish that I had seen John Fairfax."

"You would like to see him?"

"You don't understand that, Luce?"

"If you wish it that is a good enough reason."

"But not to you?"

"I would see John if he came. It would not matter to either of us, but if Mother met him——"

Paradell lay and stared at the canopy of the bed.

"Your mother goes to Farnham for the New Year. I shall not go; but you can go, Luce, and John shall come over and see me."

"I shall stop with you," she said.

They heard the wheels of the coach grinding on the road below the terrace, and Luce went to the window.

"Father," she said suddenly, "what really happened to John?"

He sat up in bed.

"My dear, I cannot tell you."

"Mother's secrecy is worse than any truth. It cannot make any difference to me."

Paradell told her, and she remained standing by the window, listening for my Lady's footsteps, her eyes empty of pity.

"I still think that John should have died. I shall always think it."

Paradell said nothing. He could not defend Fairfax in her hearing, because it meant pulling life to pieces and showing her the soiled threads.

Yet Luce could not help her thoughts wandering into Shere Hall, and trying to imagine the kind of life that John Fairfax was living there. He had lost all the male impressiveness, yet the shock of her young contempt for him had a background of pity. She was at an age that painted its impressions in black and white. Even her compassion had a hard white radiance, a pity that scorches the thing that it pities.

She did not go out all day, and when she went down into the hall to see the servants and some of her father's smaller tenants dancing there, she felt that something had happened to her, and that she was not the Luce of two years ago. She stood on the dais looking down on all the hearty faces flushed with eating and drinking, and shining with goodwill. The minstrels were in the gallery. The wainscoting was green with holly boughs. She had loved all this a year ago, come to it with the heart of a child, but life had suddenly grown serious and shown her unsuspected shadows. Her father was lying in bed in pain, and her mother had refused to be bored by these boors.

When Saunders—the major-domo—brought her a big silver cup full of wine, she drank a Christmas health to them all, but her eyes were empty of laughter.

"God bless Miss Luce!"

She noticed that there seemed less jolly uproar than of old. Some of the faces appeared to reflect her seriousness, and to be gravely and heavily sympathetic. She was thinking of the man upstairs, and in the eyes of some of these people she seemed to catch a reflection of her own thoughts: "This Christmas is his last."

Everything grew blurred. She was shaken by a sudden gust of emotion, and in mortal fear of breaking down before

them all. A year ago the idea of such a betrayal of her feelings would not have frightened her, but now she had come to the age when there was something to hide. She had attained self-consciousness. Her child's impetuous hair was up, and she felt strangely responsible before these people.

"Thank you, all of you," she said, "and God bless you all."

She turned slowly, wondering whether she would be in tears before she could escape. Saunders had opened the daïs door for her, the little door in the wainscoting. She did not look at him as she passed through it.

"Thank you, Saunders," she said, a little unsteadily.

The door closed after her, and she fancied that she had left a hush behind her in the hall. She was discovering the silences in life, the reticences, the strange new values. Things were happening no longer as a child expects them to happen, and she went back to her father's room feeling that the old familiar, happy days were dead.

CHAPTER XVIII

FAIRFAX was on the hills, trying to sweat an incipient melancholy out of his soul.

Dressed like a farmer, he had tramped some twenty miles in the rain. The track at Coldharbour had taken him through a stodge of yellow mud pocketed by the hoofs of cattle, and Fairfax's rough stockings were muddied to his knees. The hedgerows looked black, full of dead weeds and rotting vegetation. The ditches oozed with slime. In the woods the fallen leaves were caked in a wet brown mass, and the oaks, dripping with moisture, their limbs covered with grey-green lichen, looked smitten with some purulent disease. The sky was one great smothering greyness, pressing low upon the hills. Sometimes the path crossed a ploughed field, and Fairfax saw how the rain had beaten the earth into a smooth surface of brown slime. Near Barbery Hill he passed a few miserable sheep hurdled on some fallow ground under the shelter of a hedge. They stank—a sour smell that suggested decay.

There had been a month of this weather, and Fairfax could never remember having seen so much rain. He had heard the monotonous patter each morning, and the gurgling in the pipes and gutters. Sometimes a wind blew, a wind that made the tops of the elms sweep the sky, but in spite of their brushing at the clouds, never a rent of blue showed.

Fairfax paused at the stile on Barbery Hill. Northwards he saw the downs, a grey wave in a grey sea. The valley lay at his feet, a valley that had always seemed to him indescribably beautiful, a greenness laced with silver, a mystery, a little world of noble trees. To-day, it looked dreary, inexpressibly dreary and inhuman. He was conscious of surprise, of an unwillingness to admit that this winter landscape was ugly, and so ugly that it filled

him with a sense of the immanence of the Spirit of Evil. He could understand it tempting men to shut themselves in with their more sordid appetites, driving them to guzzle and to wallow in some little warm corner of animal lust. He could imagine it making them brutal even in their religion, hard, fanatical, matching ugliness with ugliness. The mud clung to his boots, and the ugliness to his soul.

During the autumn, and even when the leaves were falling, his philosophy of isolation had been able to lose itself in the beauty of the country, but now in this dead season the man in him felt lonely. For months he had not spoken with a creature of his own class. There were discontents in him, bitternesses that a dog and a hawk could not understand. Some evenings ago, in a moment of extreme loneliness, he had tried to make a confidant of Garret, only to be met with a staring embarrassment, an elephantine clumsiness.

"Why, bless you, what you want is a wife, sir."

"I shall never marry, Garret."

"Well, sir, some strapping girl might oblige."

It was not coarseness, for in those days the English recognized the essential facts of life and spoke of them without self-consciousness, as the French do still. But Garret, good soul, suggested fat red meat to a man sick with spiritual nausea, and Fairfax had to extricate himself like a shy man caught half-dressed.

As he sat on the stile in the rain under that December sky he was attacked by such a torment of loneliness that he felt that he could walk into any labourer's cottage and beg a place by the fire. This winter landscape was too inhuman; it had lost the beauty that supplies a poet with the illusion of a divine sympathy. He got off the stile and followed the path down towards the hamlet of Stoke Leuknor. There were cottages here—men, women and children, a rough perfume of life. The clouds suddenly ceased to dribble, and the arable land gave place to meadows.

The cottages of Stoke Leuknor were built round a triangular "green" with a very old yew tree in the middle of it, and as Fairfax came down the lane towards the "green" he heard shouts and brutal laughter and the

howls of a dog. Travellers from overseas have put it on record that the voices of the English common people are the ugliest in the world, and these Leuknor voices made Fairfax hesitate, but a sudden scorn of so absurd a sensitiveness sent him forward into the hamlet. He found about twenty men and boys collected on the "green," stoning a brown dog that had been tied to a bough of the yew tree. The length of cord was so short that it kept the animal's fore-paws off the ground, an additional piece of savagery that made the manner of the dog's death a matter of interesting doubt.

"Three shies for a farding."

"Bash him, Garge, afore he strangles."

Fairfax saw a stone strike the brown dog heavily on the ribs. The beast was beyond a yelp; his tongue was hanging out; he was being throttled. And Fairfax seemed to see all the unthinking stupid savagery of the world exemplified in the martyrdom of that slaving animal. He did not ask what the dog had done, what the poor beast's crime was, but he walked straight on to the green and up to the tree.

A stone struck him on the leg. He turned and looked at the man who had thrown it.

"Stop that."

He had a clasp knife in his pocket; he opened it and cut the cord, and keeping hold of the lower end of it, let the panting, shaking dog lie down on the grass. The men and boys stood and looked at Fairfax. His coolness and his calm scorn of them held them awed for a moment.

"What has the dog done?"

A little, round-shouldered man with a fringe of red hair hanging to his chin looked with hatred at Fairfax.

"That thur beast belongs t' Biddy Badlock."

"And who is she?"

"A witch, o' course. She be teaching that thur beast to worry the sheep."

"Has anybody seen him worrying sheep?"

No one had.

Fairfax looked at the dog and the dog looked at him. There was no vice in the poor beast's brown eyes, and his martyrdom touched Fairfax's memory of his own

shame. He thought that he saw shame in the eyes of the dog, an appeal against the blind and credulous prejudices of these boys and men.

"I'll go bail for him," he said. "If he worries any sheep I shall know what to do."

He spoke to the dog, gave a gentle pull at the cord, and the dog got up and followed him. But directly his back was turned the little crowd found its voice. It argued Fairfax's right to the dog, the insolence of his interference, his identity, his reputation. The crowd began to dribble after him, talking for his edification, but not willing to go beyond words.

"It be Fairfax o' Shere House."

"What, him as rode out o' London on a moke?"

"Hi, master, you let the dog be!"

Fairfax walked on, and when they saw the no surrender in the scorn of this gentleman they began to mock at him as clowns will.

*"Cowardy, cowardy custard,
Stole the lady's mustard."*

That was the jingle the boys sang to him, and Fairfax and the dog went out of Stoke Leuknor with shame upon their backs. For Fairfax felt ashamed. Even in this little hole in the side of Barbary Hill his tale seemed to be known, and these fools laughed at him! The laughter of fools is not easy to bear, however wise a man may feel himself, and looking down at the lop-eared, hairy face of the dog, Fairfax saw in the beast a fellow victim, an outcast, something that was despised. He was glad he had intervened.

The thought may have crossed Fairfax's mind that someone is always responsible for ugliness; but scorn of Stoke Leuknor cured him for a moment of his loneliness. With whom did he wish to herd? Was not a man most lonely when he was in the midst of a crowd?

He bent down and patted the dog.

"Ugly! How's that for a name?"

The dog licked his hand.

"Ugly it shall be."

Together they footed it to Shere, and reached the house as dark was falling. Fairfax saw the red glare of a fire through the lattice of the dining-room, and the light of it seemed good. The polished black panelling would be twinkling with light. He was hungry. He saw himself pulling off his dirty boots and wet stockings, and putting on a dry coat and sitting with Ugly in front of the fire. Bob, the spaniel, would have to be propitiated and persuaded to be friendly, or there would be a dog-fight under the table.

Garret met him in the hall.

"You must be wet, sir."

He held a letter in his hand, and he forgot it for a moment in looking at John's disreputable dog.

"What's this, sir?"

"Something that wants a little kindness, Garret. Keep Bob in your room for to-night. What's that—a letter?"

Garret remembered himself.

"A groom rode over from Fernhurst, sir."

"Fernhurst!"

"Sir Philip Paradell's."

Fairfax took the letter, and saw that the handwriting on the cover was Paradell's. The familiar neatness of the writing had a strange effect on him; he felt afraid, shy of any message from the outer world. Paradell had always shown him much affection, and as he hesitated to open the letter John realized how thin and sensitive was the skin of his stoicism.

He read the letter in front of the fire, after pulling off his wet shoes and stockings and finding the good English mud between his toes. A servant had brought him a dry coat, and Ugly, lying with his back resting against the brick curb of the hearth, was licking a bruised paw.

Paradell wrote:

"John, it may be that you will not be too proud to read this letter from a man who is sick. The physicians have been with me these two months, and have been able to do little to abate my pain.

"I am a-bed and all alone here, save for Luce. My lady is at Farnham.

"It would comfort me to see you, John. If you can bring yourself to ride to Fernhurst, you will be welcome. I grow more convinced each day that I am not long for this world, and as I lie here I remember that we were good friends. PARADELL."

Fairfax sat a long while considering the letter and staring at the fire. The dog, after looking inquiringly from time to time at the face of his new master, had put his nose between his paws and gone to sleep.

Fairfax's face was troubled. Should he go?

Paradell he did not fear—but Luce! He felt that he had not the courage to meet her eyes. And yet, after all, she was only a child, generous, impetuous, incapable as yet of realizing the nature of his disaster. Perhaps Paradell needed him? Yes, he would go.

The weather changed suddenly, the wind sweeping round to the north, and in the morning, when Fairfax mounted his horse, the muddy lanes were like iron and full of ice. On the downs the wind cut so keenly that his face felt as though its skin had been scraped with a blunt razor. He dismounted and walked towards lowlands that lay black under a hard grey sky. The wind tired him; there was none of the glitter and the zest of sunlight, and blue sky and the stillness of a white frost.

He sensed snow in the north, and a few dull flakes began to drift when he reached Fernhurst Park. Fairfax mounted again and rode over the hard, compact turf, with the wind making a great roaring in the trees. A few dead leaves scudded over the frozen ground, and the bracken rustled and shook.

Fairfax rode past the gardens and straight into the stable-yard. He felt stiff and cold, and short of temper. A groom was at work with a fork and a barrow, cleaning dirty litter from one of the stalls. He looked at Fairfax, recognized him, and went on filling the barrow before coming to take John's horse.

Fairfax felt a sudden rage in his blood. His right foot was out of the stirrup, and he was about to swing his leg over to dismount, but instead of dismounting he turned his horse and rode out of the yard.

At the gate at the end of the wall of the fruit garden he met Luce. She was coming from the park, wearing a coat of black fur and a red hood ; her face looked white and brilliant and a little hard.

John stared at her. It had been impossible to avoid her or to turn back, and as he sat there, angry and foolish, he was conscious of Luce as a figure that bewildered him. Her skirts had lengthened, and her hair was gathered up under her hood. The change in her seemed more subtle than the mere lengthening of a petticoat. Her eyes were different ; there was something behind them that he had never remarked in the eyes of Luce the child.

She stared, holding the wooden latch of the gate. Fairfax saw a snowflake light upon her mouth and melt there. He was afraid.

" Your visit has been a very short one," she said.

Even her voice had changed. The impulsiveness had gone out of it. She spoke calmly, like a woman, a woman very conscious of her words, and yet hiding the secret of her new self-consciousness. Fairfax could not think of anything to say, and he sat there like a fool.

" It is going to snow hard. I shall get back before dusk."

He could not tell her that he had been piqued because a groom had paid less attention to him than he had to a barrow of manure. Luce had turned her head to look at the clock in the cupola. The hands stood at ten minutes to eleven. Fairfax had more than five hours before dusk.

" Father expected you to dine with him, but still, if you are shy of the weather——"

She opened the gate and Fairfax rode through.

" I am sorry that he is ill."

" You noticed the change ? "

" I have not seen him," he blurted.

Her head went up.

" Not seen him ! But why——? "

He had turned his horse and was facing her again, and feeling such a scorn of himself that he was ready to sneer openly at his own behaviour. Luce was studying him, and it seemed to Fairfax that there was no friendliness in her eyes, but rather a puzzled hostility.

"I will come back," he said. "Sometimes one behaves like a fool."

But Luce closed the gate, and stood with her gloved hands resting on the top of it.

"No," she said. "I think that you would give him no comfort."

She remained as a guard, looking at him steadily and without pity, but without a trace of scorn. It seemed to Fairfax that he did not matter to her, that her thoughts were with her father, and that she had no use for a man whose heart was so selfishly sick and cold that it could not forget itself in the pain of a friend. And she was right. Her eyes looked through him.

"Don't tell him I came," he said. "May I ask you to promise me that?"

She reflected a moment.

"Yes."

"If I ride over to-morrow, will you meet me here at the gate, at the same hour?"

"What for?"

"To judge my fitness. I promise you that I will not come unless I can forget——"

He saw a little glimmer of something that was like pity flash into her eyes, and it hurt him—hurt him most damnably. Pity!

"Yes, you may come."

He turned and rode slowly away, but she remained at the gate watching him. He did not look back.

"Fool, fool!" he was saying.

And then other thoughts poured through him.

"How she has changed! What is it? There is something about her, something I never remember."

It came on him in a moment that Luce had grown beautiful, not with an obvious baby prettiness, but with a beauty that was slow to grow and more tantalizing in its subtlety. She did not flash upon men triumphantly but stood a little in the shadow, waiting for life to come to her. "That black, lean, maddening wench of Paradell's." There were men who were to call her that, men whose blood was fierce and hot, men who were to be baulked by her in the struggle to drag her down. She was to be hunted,

and to wound those who hunted her. For Luce Paradell had mystery. Her unlaughing eyes would look at a man from under their black eyebrows and tell him nothing. She was intense, and yet calm as white light, facing flattery as though she mistrusted it, never showing any confusion or any change of colour. Yet sex was there, a red light burning inside that unblemished body of hers, a body that had never surrendered.

As a poor, wild, desperate boy sang of her :

“ She burns me, and then touches me with ice.”

CHAPTER XIX

IT was a white world when the sun rose, a very still and wonderful world under a blue sky. The north wind had passed, after plastering the trunks of the trees with white pilasters and banking the snow against the hedges. Fairfax had ordered his horse to be brought to the door at nine. He came down to a blazing log fire, and a picture of the two dogs, Bob and Ugly, lying on the buckskin rug as though their friendship dated from puppydom. The spaniel was licking the mongrel's head with the air of a Samaritan.

Fairfax bent down and patted both of them, but he gave Bob his right hand and the first caress.

"I like you, Robert, you good-hearted old ruffian."

At nine he was in the saddle and climbing one of the tracks over the downs. The landscape spread itself in a great rolling whiteness, the deep woods looking the colour of amethyst, here and there a little column of blue smoke rising straight from some chimney; but on the breadth of the downs he found a beautiful desolation, a great silence. Man was not here. He saw a black crow picking at some piece of carrion. There were the footmarks of rabbits and of hares, and once he noted a little patch of blood and feathers, the mark of a winter tragedy.

The redness thereof coloured Fairfax's thoughts. In the centre of everything was the blood-red hood that Luce Paradell had worn yesterday, encompassing her black hair and the firm white pallor of her face. He could still see her standing at the gate, her brown gauntlets, embroidered with green silk, resting on the top bar and holding it against him. Fairfax saw something symbolical in her figure. She seemed to stand like the angel of youth with a flaming sword, holding him back from the great mysteries of life. He had not found the password, the laughing, patient yet ironical valour that unlocks all gates.

What did she think of him? Had she even troubled to think of him and his humiliation? What value did she attach to the life that he was living? Could she appreciate his philosophy?

Yet Fairfax had never felt less sure of himself than on that winter morning, less convinced of the rightness of his outlook upon life. There was snow on the hills of Greece, and he was riding to Delphi to hear what a voice might say to him—the voice of youth, uncompromising, untouched by the bland cynicism of an effete State religion. He had a strange feeling that Luce knew everything, that it was impossible to deceive her, that she could stretch out a hand and point scorn at all the motives that were obscure and cowardly. She was a mirror. He had a solemn and passionate desire to look into that mirror, to see himself in it—and yet he was afraid.

On reaching the park paling he heard the clock at Fernhurst strike the half hour, two clear bell-notes vibrating in the silence of a snow-white world. Fairfax dismounted, threw his bridle over the gatepost, and walked up and down, for it would take him less than ten minutes to cross the park. He was conscious of feeling excited, eager to look into Luce's eyes again, and yet ready to shrink from what he might see there. Did she despise him so utterly? Was her conception of life as clear and as definite as one of those great trees, naked and black against the background of the snow? Was life no more than a puppet-show, with God and the Devil looking on, or was it a mystery, a movement, a complex of strange forces, the invisible sap that eludes analysis? Was man but the dupe of his body? Did love exist, and all the fineness thereof, or had men set out to dream dreams in order to escape from the vanities of the flesh?

Fairfax mounted, passed through the gate, and rode on.

Presently, on the edge of a great white plain, he saw that little point of flame burning in the sunlight. She was there, waiting by the gate, wearing that same red hood that made him think of the colour of blood. He was conscious of a tightening of the sinews in his back, a tuning up of every muscle, an alertness that counted her an enemy. He caught the thought and was astonished

by it, that he should be afraid of Luce—this child. But she was a child no longer. She had become a stranger, a mirror that was covered by a curtain.

The space between them seemed to be an interval of suspense, the ground between the horsemen who charge at the gallop and the pikes and muskets of a stolid infantry, waiting. Fairfax pricked his horse with the spurs, and wiped out the suspense at a canter. Her face ceased to be a little oval of whiteness in the wreath of her hood. He saw her eyes, steady, intense, enigmatical, watching him without a tremor of welcoming light. Almost could he have flinched from the attack, a boy on a horse thundering towards levelled pikes, with a moment to think of how it might feel to have the steel in his bosom.

He was reining in his horse when she opened the gate to let him through. There was to be no battle, not even a parley. He was surprised.

"Thank you," he said to her, hat in hand, and preparing to dismount.

Luce closed the gate behind him, wondering at the impulse that had made her open it. She was aware of his surprise, and could not decide whether it pleased her.

"I doubted whether you would come."

Fairfax was a-foot now, leading his horse, his head still uncovered. She was thinking how much older he looked, and how unhappy his eyes were. He had been so easily sure of himself in the old days, so sure that she knew now that he must have been somewhat stupid.

"You thought my courage would fail?"

"No; I thought the snow might stop you."

She walked on towards the house, considering that one word "courage." Cowardice in a man is the one weakness that the elemental woman cannot easily forgive, threatening to leave her to be the food of the beasts. And Fairfax had spoken of courage, of the courage that had been needed to bring him to Fernhurst. It seemed to her a very poor and a very colourless virtue.

She did not answer him, and he was compelled to extricate himself from her silence.

"How is Sir Philip?"

"In less pain to-day. He is dressed and downstairs."

"I am sorry, Luce."

"Sorry?"

"I mean that this sickness of his has hurt me. Your father was always a very sure friend to me, so wise a man."

She did not respond, and it seemed to Fairfax that he was of so little weight that his words were mere feathers. He could not shout at her like some fool of a huckster, or cry like a 'prentice, "What d'ye lack in me?" He knew.

Luce turned aside at the gate leading into one of the garden walks.

"Will you take your horse to the stable? You will find us in the dining-room."

He smiled at her faintly.

"So you despise me," he thought. "Is there anyone on earth who does not despise me?"

The same fellow who had shown so little forwardness was brushing the snow from the stable-yard. He came forward and took Fairfax's horse, but without touching his hat or with any friendliness in his eyes. The incident, trivial though it was, remained like a speck of dust in John's eye. He was out of temper with himself and with the whole world, and so little of a stoic that he was ready to be humiliated by the cock of a dog's tail.

A servant met him in the hall and took his hat, cloak, switch and gloves. Fairfax had known the man for years, but he did not speak to him, or even look at the fellow as though he was a thing of flesh and blood. His silence left the man sneering: "A lot you have to be proud of!"

Paradell was sitting in a high-backed arm-chair in front of the fire, a chair that Luce had stuffed with cushions. His red velvet coat made his face look pinched and yellow, and his legs no longer filled his stockings. Fairfax was shocked by the change in a man who had always been so buxom and handsome and debonair, and the pity that he felt was good for him, in that it made him forget to think of his own dignity.

"Forgive me for not rising, John, but Luce has so padded me with cushions——"

"I'm sorry, indeed, to see you like this, sir."

Paradell glanced quickly at Luce and gave Fairfax an almost imperceptible shake of the head.

" I am paying for my sins, John."

He smiled and met the girl's eyes, eyes of combative affection.

" As if you had sins to remember ! "

" Plenty, my dear."

" Not many, sir, judging how the world feels to you."

There was emotion in Fairfax's voice. He seated himself on one of the high-backed chairs and stared at the fire. Luce had placed herself at the opposite corner of the broad fireplace, and Paradell was between them, his legs resting on a joint stool. The oak panelling and the furniture warmed themselves in the firelight. The red damask curtains at the windows were strips of colour framing the white garden and the white park.

A servant entered with a glass of wine on a salver.

" There is an hour yet before dinner, John."

Fairfax took the wine, and as he sat there sipping it he could not help but think how life had changed for him since last he was in this house. Paradell was a doomed man. Beyond him Luce sat very upright and quiet in her chair, her hands lying in her lap, her face suggesting a refusal to accept the fatal facts that her eyes discovered. She was absorbed in watching her father, and Fairfax felt that he himself stirred no ripple on the quiet surface of her consciousness.

From that moment he began to love her. In after years he could always date the beginnings of his love for Luce, and associate the first pathos of it with the memory of a fire-lit room, the snow, Paradell in his red coat, the eyes of a girl who looked at death and refused to recognize it. His own nothingness was part of the picture, a streak of melancholy, the shadowiness of a figure on the edge of the canvas. His manhood did not count, and the realization of his nothingness set Luce somewhere in a world of mystery and of strangeness, his heart forgetting the child comrade of two years ago in the gradual and strange beauty of the woman.

After dinner Luce left them alone together. Paradell was in no pain, and the natural temper of the man reasserted itself, and he became again the Paradell whom Fairfax had known so well. A buoyant scepticism had character-

ized Paradell's mental attitude towards life. He had obeyed all the conventions because he was too much a lover of peace to quarrel over things that did not matter to him. He had always been a laughing philosopher, shrewd, indulgent, tolerant even of his wife's tongue. His daily philosophy had been summed up in two sayings :

"Cause no pain."

"Cultivate your garden."

There was such a gentleness in the man's nature that he had been able to wear the clothes of a country gentleman, sit in his church pew, listen to preposterously dull sermons, and remain smiling, handsome and unprovoked. He was infinitely wise in his attitude towards ignorance. He never sneered. He did not believe in the spirit of revolt. "Why help to complete the same old circle? Things always come back to where they were." He loved Luce with a very great love, but there were moments now when he did not understand her.

"Well, John, and how is Shere?"

He wanted Fairfax to talk to him of himself, but he had watched the swarthy, difficult face of this young man of misfortune, and knew better than to vex him with questions. And yet slowly, almost inevitably, they drifted into an atmosphere of intimacy and understanding. Fairfax had begun to realize the hell of his own loneliness. There had been no one to whom he could escape, no one before whom he could strip his soul naked.

Paradell spoke of death, his own death.

"It is like the moment of awakening at the end of a dream. In a second of time you know all that matters and all that does not matter."

He was thinking of Luce, for to him she was the only living thing that mattered. He wanted her to be happy and to escape the pain of the grosser disillusionments. Two years ago his secret plan had been to marry her to Fairfax, knowing men as he did, and having a certain love for John and a belief in his cleanness. My Lady Catharine had other schemes, and Paradell had thought to circumvent her by giving youth the chance to settle its own destiny; but Fairfax himself had ruined the romance. Luce was romantic. Her father had been a

wilful enthusiast in setting the torch alight. She was a dear fanatic in her young ideals, and Fairfax had failed to live to the high level of these ideals.

"It is the thing you leave behind, John."

Fairfax understood him.

"Luce?"

"Yes, Luce. She will ask much, and will not easily be satisfied. I am speaking of her marriage."

"She is still a child."

"Do you think so, John? The change comes so quickly. You cannot say. Yesterday she was a child; to-day she has become a woman. The landscape remains the same, but the lights and shadows may be different. Directly I am dead I know what will happen."

"What?"

"My Lady will go to London; Fernhurst will be shut up; the hunt will begin, the hunt for the magnificent husband."

He bent forward, looking at the fire, tormented by the knowledge that he was helpless. One of the cushions fell, and Fairfax got up and replaced it.

"I have never spoken of this to anyone, John. It was always my idea that you should marry Luce."

They did not look at each other. Fairfax had gone back to his chair with a face of gloom.

"Yes, I made a pitiable fool of myself," he said, "and all the world knows it. Let us be honest. Even Luce despises me."

"I will not deny it, John. She is fierce in her friendships."

"And what chance did I give her? I am damned as a coward and a fool. I came down here to play the stoic."

"You are too young for that."

"Too young?"

"When you reach the forties you learn to shrug your shoulders. Nothing matters very seriously. You have the end in view. But youth should not be able to shrug its shoulders; it is the age when a man fights, and no woman will forgive him in her heart for not fighting. We are the victims of such fine illusions, John, such beautiful generousities and renunciations. We dress life in these illusions, and some of us are apt to forget the body underneath them."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Religion says, 'Love your brother as you love yourself.' The truth is, 'By all means love your brother when you will not hurt yourself by loving him.' But a man's own body comes first. If you starve yourself that your brother may live, will your brother remember it? He will not wish to remember it. Gratitude is a slave's virtue. Put a man under an obligation and he will end by hating you. I have watched life and studied it, John, and never yet have I found a man who did not strive for his own happiness and the happiness of those near him. It may be good to love your neighbour; it is much wiser to be ready to hate him."

And Fairfax smiled.

"How is it that nobody hates you?"

"Because I have always loved myself, John, happily and with a good appetite, and the wholesome, healthy selfishness has given me the leisure and the temper to be kind to others. Your altruist is an uncomfortable person. If you cannot learn to love the creature that you know best, even your own self, how can you expect to master the art of loving others? For it is an art, John. It is easier to love a dog than a man; men can be so ugly, so difficult."

He lay back again against his cushions, and Fairfax sat with his elbows on his knees, frowning at the fire.

"I no longer love myself," he said.

"Then life must be very hard for you, John. A man who hates himself hates others. And the proof of it is that he avoids them."

Fairfax began to speak, staring at the fire as though he were looking for pictures in a crystal.

"That's true. I avoid people. I hate myself. I was afraid to come here, to meet Luce. I thought that I could bury myself at Shere, and become a lover of books and of trees, but that is an old man's life; I see it now. A young man must satisfy the adventure of his youth or lose the good will of his own body. Everything comes from the body, all our fine emotions and our heroics; at least, that is how it seems to me. The Greeks understood that so well. The Christians persecuted the body, and we still suffer martyrdom."

He paused, frowning, rubbing an eyebrow with a straight forefinger.

"Even if it were possible, I could not expect Luce to think well of me until I had learnt again to love myself. I see what you mean. There is something sacred in this self-love; in it there is the exultation of the saint. The saint believes that he loves himself in loving others; you would say that he loves himself so well that he cannot rest until he is loved by others. Perhaps that is true. But I see that a day will come when I shall have to go a journey in search of my self-love."

"And to what country, John?"

"I have had thoughts of rooting myself up and of going to Virginia, or of entering some foreign service."

"Why travel to the other end of the world? Life is the same everywhere."

"Yes, that is true. But I am still wandering in the dark. I shall not come to the light yet. And I have an idea that when my inspiration comes it will be wonderfully unlike any of my dreams."

Paradell had turned in his chair and was listening. He had heard the sound of footsteps in the hall. The door opened and Luce entered the room.

Fairfax seemed to wake. He rose and glanced at her with peculiar intentness, as though he had a premonition that the inspiration that he dreamed of would come from her. The youth in her might have some message for the youth in him.

He looked at the sun and saw that it was stooping to the horizon.

"I must go, or I shall be caught on the downs."

He turned to Paradell.

"I hope I have not tired you?"

"No; come again, John, and soon."

As he bowed to Luce, Fairfax looked at her questioningly for some little remnant of her old buoyant friendliness. Her eyes met his quite calmly, so calmly that he was hurt. She had no message for him, no message that mattered.

"It has been quite like old times," he said to both of them, knowing that it had been nothing of the kind.

CHAPTER XX

MY Lady came back from Farnham with a young man in her coach.

He was very pale, and rather spotted about the neck and beard, a blemish that worried him a little, judging by the faint bloom of powder on his coat. He was very well built. His teeth were strong and white. He had bold, pale-blue eyes that stared, and broke seldom into a smile. His manners were exquisite, a little more exquisite than his clothes. He talked a great deal, and in a voice whose expression never varied—a big, round, confident voice resonant as a drum.

Paradell was reading his Plato when his wife conveyed this young man into the room. Rather splendid in her furs, and a little triumphant, she went across to her husband and kissed the top of his forehead.

"My dear, how are you? I have brought Sir Gavin Bellasis to cheer you up. He has promised to stay a few days."

Paradell's eyes looked large and astonished, but he was given no time to develop his astonishment. Moreover, he had very good manners. My Lady had traded often upon his courtesy.

"Come here, Rogue."

She was arch, vivacious.

"I assure you he has made us all fat with laughing. Such a wit. You can put away your book, Phil."

Paradell stood up, supporting himself on the arms of his chair.

"You are very welcome."

Bellasis was apologizing, expostulating, and with the air of a young man whose gestures were always hearty and masterful.

"My dear sir, please do not rise. I have not come here to disturb you. Permit me——"

Luce came into the room while Sir Gavin Bellasis was rearranging the cushions that had slipped down in her father's chair. She stood a moment watching, remembering that she had danced with this young man at Sir Peter Teazle's house in Covent Garden.

This Bellasis was the eldest of four brothers, the sons of the Marquis of Amersham, and since the Marquis's legs were dropsical and as big as bolsters, Gavin Bellasis was very near his father's shoes. These four Bellasis brothers were notable young men. They excelled as swordsmen, at tennis, as runners, wrestlers, horsemen; they were gay, modish, disastrous to women. Gossip had much to say of their exploits and their adventures; of the handsome insolence of their behaviour, and how they made other men look puny.

My Lady Catharine retained a kind of cold comeliness, but if she had coqueted at Farnham with this young rake, it was because she remembered his father's shoes. She had not forgotten that he had been piqued by Luce, and that he liked black women with hot tempers. Also she was taking a secret delight in outraging the feelings of a man who was sick unto death. She had long years of Paradell's philosophy to avenge, and she had come to that state of life when all food has to be spiced with cynicism.

Paradell protested.

"Why bring that fellow here?"

She was brutally frank in her retorts.

"I wish him to marry Luce. Yes, of course you will tell me that he has been a rake. But Bellasis is tired of it; he is ready to settle down. Amersham won't last a year."

"I shall warn Luce."

"My dear, I have done it already. I have told her: 'Here is a fine young fellow who has been rather gay, but who is ready to fall in love in earnest.'"

Paradell was in pain, and a man in pain loses his delicate touch.

"I forbid it."

She looked at him archly, and he understood at last the cruelty of this woman who had lived with him all these years.

"You count on me dying soon, Kate. Yes, I shall not last long, but I flatter myself that I shall leave a live flame burning in Luce."

"My dear Phil, this sickness has made you yellow."

"I wish John Fairfax had her," he blurted.

My Lady made a most sweet grimace.

"He never will. Not because I shall interfere, but because Luce will always despise him."

For a month they left it at that and faced each other as silent enemies. Luce showed neither red nor white. She seemed a little aloof from life, watching it, and Paradell had faith in her romanticism. He believed that she would hold out until her heart was set alight.

Bellasis came and went. He broke in a young horse whose temper no one had been able to tame. He talked. He was very benevolent towards Paradell, ready with an arm or a cushion, and a "let me oblige you, sir." He teased Luce and kept his eyes and his tongue from the naked boldness of Whitehall. He kissed my Lady's hand and saluted her cheek. The Fernhurst dogs loved him; he was so cheerful an animal.

John Fairfax rode over twice during the month of January, and was surprised at the complaisance that my Lady showed him. She was kind to him with the kindness that she might show to the parson or to a poor relation, and she displayed it purposely in Luce's presence.

"You should get married, John, with that big house of yours."

She was mocking him, and Fairfax soon realized that he was being mocked. He would stare at his plate, and hardly dare to look at Luce. And my Lady's mouth was full of the name of Bellasis, of the wit and splendour of this notable family, of its quarterings and its estates, and of the coming death of poor, swaddle-legged Amersham.

John could hold his patience with Catharine Paradell, but on the day that he met Gavin Bellasis his stoicism broke like a rotten stick. They met in Sir Philip's room on a sunny February morning, John muddy with riding through mud-splashes, *farouche*, on guard; Bellasis pallid, omniscient, talking in that round, full voice of his to Paradell and ignoring John. Luce sat in the window-seat

like a girl watching a spectacle. Her mother was listening to Bellasis with that enthralled air that a clever woman uses when she has her reasons.

The talk touched on the play-houses, the domestic confusions of the Duke of York, the beauty of Mrs. Davis, and the indiscretions of the King. John could follow none of it, and like an uncouth and jealous dog, he sat in his corner, growling occasionally, and finding his growls ignored. Presently they began to speak of horses, and my Lady had much to say of the beast that Bellasis had tamed.

"No other man could have done it."

Her eyes searched for John's.

"He threw Cuttance yesterday, and would not let him up again."

Bellasis shrugged it off.

"I shall have to ask Sir Philip to sell me the colt. I doubt that there is another man who could sit him."

Fairfax heard himself speaking, and knew that his voice was the voice of a fool.

"I would like to lay a wager on that."

They looked at him, all of them, Paradell with eyes of warning.

"Why, to be sure. Who is your man, Mr. Fairfax?"

Bellasis was smiling at him like a good-humoured, unmalicious boy.

"Myself."

"That is gallant. I have heard some tale of a ride of yours, Mr. Fairfax, but upon my soul I have forgotten it."

John's face flamed, but he held himself in.

"May I try this colt of yours, Sir Philip?"

Paradell nodded. It seemed to him the easiest way of avoiding a quarrel.

A servant was sent for, and a groom ordered to saddle the colt and lead him out into the park. The two men went out, and my Lady with them. Paradell remained in his chair, Luce at the window.

The affair was staged on a stretch of grass beyond the garden wall and visible from Luce's window. The colt was brought out, and began to fight from the moment Fairfax tried to mount him. He reared, struck out with

his fore-feet, but in the end John got into the saddle and found the stirrups.

Luce sat still as death. She was afraid for the man, but not for John. She saw him pitched off into the little brook that ran across the path; the colt came cantering back to Bellasis, who called him. He suffered Bellasis to mount and to ride up and down in front of the drenched man who had crawled out of the brook.

Luce was conscious of a spasm of pity, a pity that was touched with scorn.

"Well, who wins?" asked a voice from the padded chair.

"The colt has thrown John into the brook."

"I suspected it."

"Sir Gavin is riding him."

"Yes; and yet John is the better man."

She was surprised by the bitterness in her father's voice.

"Yes," she said, as though speaking to herself, "but John fails—always."

Fairfax did not return to the house, for my Lady and Bellasis had stabbed him. She had stood there laughing, and crying:

"Oh, John, I hope Sir Philip saw it; he has not laughed these three weeks. Oh, my dear John, where is your philosophy?" He left Bellasis showing off the colt's paces, and going to the stable, took his own horse from the stall and rode off in his wet clothes. He could still hear Paradell's servants laughing in the stable yard.

That was Fairfax's last ride for many a long week. Two days later he was a-bed with a body that flamed and a stab of pain in his side. A darkness came over him. He remembered fighting for breath, the passing of the pain, and a night when he seemed to go down and down into a deep, black sea, a sea that was full of strange, evanescent shadows. He heard voices. Somehow he knew that Lawyer Pegler was there, sitting by the four-post bed, and trying to make him understand and answer some question. Another voice was persuading Pegler to go away.

"He's dying, man, dying. It is no use."

Through the deeps of that dark sea the word seemed to quiver: "Dying, dying." And Fairfax did not care.

He seemed to be floating towards nothingness, far away from the stresses and strains of life, carried along on a beautiful melancholy, by a sense of soft surrender.

But he did not die. He came back to the discomfort of living like a man rescued from drowning. He had half his chest full of fluid. He was blistered, he was cupped, he was prodded with needles, he drank the most nauseous concoctions, and sometimes he lay and cried like a child. Why all this fuss and fury, this vexing of his body? He would look at his hands as they lay outside the coverlet, and think how like they were to claws, thin and white, with the nails long and curved. Once, being curious, he made the nurse bring him a mirror, and in it he seemed to see a strange man. He had a cut-throat beard, his cheeks and temples had fallen in, his teeth were yellow, his hair touched over the ears with grey.

"Yes, that is what I am, Mary, the real I."

He seemed fascinated by his own frowsy ugliness, and the nurse, who was a jocund but shrewd soul, took the mirror away and scolded him.

"None of that, Mr. Fairfax! Why, in two months you will be all red and hearty."

"God forbid," he said.

But he insisted on having his hawk carried into the room each morning, and he would lie and stroke the bird with a feather. Bob and Ugly made a snoozing place of his bed, lying at his feet, one on either side, and resting their heads on his ankles. Sometimes he would remain very still for an hour, not liking to disturb them. Mrs. Mary was more masterful, a kind-hearted, blustering genius.

"Now, you dogs, outside if you please."

Their way of humouring her made Fairfax smile. Ugly would move himself, look solemnly at Mrs. Mary, and give something like a wink at John, get off the bed and walk slowly to the door. He would pause there, turn, and look for the spaniel. "Come on, you fellow. The woman has got to be humoured." They disappeared side by side, very sedately, like a couple of serious old men.

Fairfax began to understand that the spring was near. He heard blackbirds and thrushes singing; the days were lengthening; the gardener had sent him up a pot of

crocuses that flamed like an Eastern dawn. He saw the white clouds of March gallop past his window, and the blackness of his woods changing to a delicate purple. Mr. Roger Fairbrother, his physician, came in with dust on his boots and the wind in his blue eyes.

"Now then, sir, now then, here's weather to blow away the cobwebs!"

He always remembered the day when Luce came to see him, because the gardener had sent up a pot of hyacinths, and the scent of them filled the room. Also, he had not been shaved, and he was grieved to think that she should see him with a dirty chin. But when Luce had gone away he realized it had not mattered. Even if his face had been a great sore it would not have mattered.

He had heard horses outside the house, and a sound of voices. Mrs. Mary had appeared, a little flustered and mysterious.

"Here is a young lady to see you, Mr. John."

"But I am not——"

"Tut, tut! It would do anyone good to look at her. She carries a letter, but asks to see you. It is my Lady Luce, of course."²

"I will see her," he had said, trying not to feel afraid.

She came in and sat beside his bed, dressed in a black silk riding habit and cavalier hat. She was very calm, so calm that any dream that he had had broke like a bubble. A gloved hand laid a letter on the bed.

"From my father. But I wished to see you for a moment."³

Her voice was kind. He saw that her eyes pitied him, as they would have pitied anything that looked sick and forlorn. He was conscious of his beard, and of all the unwholesomeness of a sick-bed, and of the nails that were too long upon his fingers.

He did not know what to say to her, and so spoke of her father.

"How is Sir Philip?"⁴

She was looking towards the window, and he saw her soft mouth quiver.

"In great pain always."⁵

"I am sorry."⁶

"He is patient. His patience makes me ashamed of God."

Fairfax felt his heart give a leap in him. She seemed to have come suddenly near, so near that he felt that he could speak to her ; but while he was hesitating she killed the impulse.

"Father wished me to see you. We were so sorry, John. Even Sir Gavin Bellasis."

"It was my own fault."

"Sir Gavin rode over with me. He sends you his good wishes."

Fairfax felt smothered.

"Sometimes," he began, "it is so easy——"

But Luce had risen. She walked to the window and stood a moment looking down into the garden, the black shape of her outlined against the glow of the afternoon sunlight. Then she turned, bent down and put her face close to the hyacinths, smiled a strange little smile, and went towards the door.

"Good-bye, John. You will come and see us some day."

"Never !" he said in his heart, almost savagely.

But when she had gone he tottered out of bed, seized the pot of hyacinths, breathed in the scent of them, and fainted.

Mrs. Mary found him lying there, and the pot broken on the floor.

CHAPTER XXI

THE spring came, that season of sadness and of joy, with its exultation and its greenness, its hiding of death in a mystery of leaves. The birds sang, and behind their singing was the little complaining of the dead things that could neither sing nor weep.

Never had any season seemed more sad than this. The year breathed hot and cold, like a girl who is faint-hearted and sees death in the eyes of her lover. There were wonderful still mornings, dew-drenched, full-throated with exultation. The woods and the meadows laughed, and the yellow broom waved to the woodland shadows. Birds were mating. The fruit trees put on their bridal frocks to the music of the bees. Young men went to their work thinking of young girls, and the long grass, and little struggles in the moonlight. Older men grew brisk and sentimental. At noon life seemed rich and good. But with the evenings came that little mysterious northern chill, that moment of doubt and of coldness. The eyes of the earth seemed afraid before the cold, calm face of the evening.

Death steals over the hill. The passionate "I" in the heart of man is troubled, challenged and afraid. And somehow the greenness of spring seems but the winter in disguise, a beautiful anguish, or a kiss snatched before a parting, or the beginning of a feast with Death waiting to clear the tables.

Paradell was dying, and Fairfax struggling back to life.

Fairfax sat in the sun or wandered about the garden, for he was very weak still, in body as well as in mind. A great melancholy possessed him; he felt older than Adam, a venerable and benevolent sceptic who had experienced everything that was to be experienced, one whom life would never surprise. He was amused by his own thin hands,

his spindle-shanks, his long face with its serene melancholy. He felt that he desired nothing, and that this apathy would last for ever.

But as his strength returned and the rising tide of his youth flowed back, he became restless and more actively unhappy. His thoughts were reaching out always after the romantic things that had eluded him. He was bitterly conscious of the futile part he had played as a man. The thought of Luce tormented him—Luce with her new mystery caught up in another man's arms. This madness was different from that other madness, and his passion for Barbara Rackstraw. In that case he had fought for the woman and a chivalrous idea, but now he was moved to fight for the woman and himself. And yet these moods of yearning led him to turn savagely and to wound his own pride.

"To what purpose? You fool!"

Even his passing bodily weakness angered him, and he set himself to overcome it. He was short in the wind after his pleurisy and the inflammation of his lungs, and the first time that he tried to climb the downs on foot the blood went out of his brain and his eyes filled with blackness. He lay in the grass, faint and sick and angry, and his anger became a scourge for the daily whipping of his body. He walked, and would come home shaking at the knees and white as a chlorotic girl. This physical exhaustion helped him to sleep. He went out with his hawk and completed her training; but when she had flown at and killed her first heron he lost his interest in the bird. He found that even a vicarious killing revolted him. Not that he himself was not ready to kill. There was a primitive part of him that knew how easy it was to kill and how little significance killing had, and how little he would regret it. There were men whose blood he would have spilt in sacrifice to his own youth, such men as Hargreaves, Trevanion, Bellasis. At the back of all his melancholy and his moodiness was the one sure thought that his strength mattered, a strength that can be calm and insolent, generous and merciless.

Once or twice as his strength returned he tramped over the hills as far as the Fernhurst valley. There was

a famous wood here on the edge of the park, a wood of glorious old beeches, with a gate opening into it through the park palings, and a great green glade in the centre. It was called in those parts "Lost Lady's Wood," but how the name had come to it no man knew.

Luce had loved its green glooms, and she still loved them. One day in May she and Fairfax were there in the wood together, yet never guessed it—the "Lost Lady" and the "Lost Man." They breathed in the same hushed silence, passed through the same quiver of sunlight and shadow in the glade, yet never met.

To Luce also the spring had brought a cry of pain, and moods of bewilderment and of sadness.

Her father lay dying, and dying slowly with horror and with anguish. He could swallow no solid food now; the cancer was starving him, nor was he ever free from pain. Luce looked on with a little flame of bitter anger in her heart. If there was a God—and she believed there was a God—then God was responsible for torturing her father, a man whose whole life had been full of calm kindness. This ancient riddle left her rebellious.

Death and the nearness of death seemed to give such strange new values to things.

It seemed necessary for her to hate her mother.

And Bellasis? This young man had touched her not a little, because she was deceived by his kindness to her father. Bellasis had handsome manners, and the graciousness that your born aristocrat is trained to assume. He was shrewd, loved popularity, and knew that he might be able to approach Luce through her love for her father. He put on the velvet shoes of restrained compassion. He wanted Luce, but he had hunted women ever since sex had matured in him, and he knew that Luce was shy and wild. A romantic abduction, a lover's violence, was the last resource in such a case. You set a trap and baited it with sympathy.

Bellasis rode over thrice a week. Luce had let him hold her hand and kiss it.

"My sweet, how you suffer!" was his cry.

Her dark eyes had begun to welcome him. He seemed very strong and gentle; moreover, he attracted her;

the Bellasis of her idea was acceptable to her as a woman. She did not know the real man, or even the shadow of him, for in life we know but the shadows of our friends.

Yet Bellasis could not be sure of Paradell as he was sure of the mother. Paradell would look at him with strange, tortured eyes in a dead face. Paradell was in pain, and in the valley of doubt and of shadows.

But one morning Paradell saw clearly. He would have to open the book of this young man's life and compel Luce to read it. He did not know what effect it might have on her, but read it she should.

He had hardly come by the decision when she entered the room, bringing the fresh flowers with which she dressed his bedroom—gillyflower, tulips, and a sheaf of white narcissi. She held them for him to smell.

Paradell smelt them almost with greediness. His poor neck and head seemed to strain towards the life that was slipping away, and Luce saw it, and could have thrown herself down in a storm of tears. She could say nothing.

Then Paradell began to speak, with obvious effort, as she moved about the room.

"Luce, there are certain things that I must tell you."

"Yes, dear."

"Bellasis, I want to speak about Bellasis. You like him a little?"

"Yes, a little," she confessed.

"Then you must try to forgive me."

He told her everything, without malice and without heat, almost with kindness, and while he uncovered the nakedness of the young rake's soul, Luce went on with the arranging of her flowers, her back turned towards her father, her face strangely stark and set. In a little while Paradell had made an end, and lay looking at her with anxious, yearning eyes.

"I wished you to know this, Luce, because my only thought is for you to be happy. These are hard words for a man to speak, but there is someone in this house who has driven me to them."

Luce knew that he spoke of her mother. She was a little dazed, and more shocked than her father realized.

"I have not hurt you, Luce?"

She turned suddenly and ran to him, and taking him in her arms, kissed him with strange passion.

"No, no! I thank you for this. You have saved me from something. I did not know——"

She broke away again, fighting with her emotion, pretending that one of the vases did not please her. She took out the flowers and rearranged them, compelling herself to seem calm and unwounded.

"I did not know. You need have no fear for me, dear; I can be very strong."

"Marriage is everything to a woman, child."

"I think I know that," she said; "how I know it I cannot tell you, but it is there. This man could never be anything to me now."

In a little while she escaped, and then the storm of her emotion broke. In the gallery outside her father's room there was an oriel window overlooking the garden, and here she hid herself for the moment, breathing the clean air at the open lattice. She felt that she had escaped from something, some unsuspected and undreamed of horror, and she was all tremulous with the shock of it, this saving of her soul at the edge of a precipice. For Luce was virginal. Compromise, cynicism, any rivalry in love revolted her. She was passionate, but too fastidious and too proud to be a wanton. There are women who are attracted by a man who has been successful with other women. They are inflamed by the passion to possess and be possessed, but Luce was not one of these. She could be inspired by a tender austerity. She asked the man to bring her what she brought to him, a passion that was pure and unselfish.

She hated Bellasis now, hated him all the more fervently because he had been able to move her not a little. She felt that she had suffered herself to be touched by something that was unclean, linen that had not been washed since other women had worn it. Were men like that? Then she would never marry! But no, she would not believe it, she need not believe it, for had not her father told her that there were men who were not like Gavin Bellasis?

Luce left the window, and on the stairs she met her mother.

"Bellasis is here, child."

Her mother's cold slyness was salt rubbed on a wound.

"Father has told me the truth about Bellasis. I will never see him again."

She would have passed her mother, but my Lady laid hold of her by the arm. She had a patch of redness on either cheek, and her eyes stared.

"What's this?"

Luce's anger was an accusation.

"You never told me! You would have let me marry him."

"You—shall—marry him."

"Mother——"

They stood looking into each other's eyes with that terrible frankness that leaves no shadow of an illusion. Then Luce cried out, but not with pain.

"Come into your room. Not here. This is too terrible."

It was she who led the way into my Lady's room, closed the door, and stood with her back to it. She was very fierce now, fierce with the clean anger of her unpolluted youth.

"So it is true—all that father has told me."

"Your father is such a fool. What has he told you?"

Luce steadied herself; she drew a deep breath.

"This man has loved many women."

"Well?"

"He does not come to me—as I should have come to him."

My Lady looked at her gravely. She seemed to be considering something, looking at the blade of a knife before she used it.

"You little fool—all men are like that."

"Mother!"

"What do you know? Do you think that when I married your father—I expected——"

She paused, for Luce was looking at her with such horror, such scorn, yet with such infinite pity that she knew that the wound that she had inflicted would never cease to bleed.

Luce had opened the door.

"If I did not pity you so much——" she said.

My Lady's eyes had been like the sullen and insolent eyes of a woman of the streets.

"Thank you, my dear. I have set out always to tell you the truth, and this is the way you thank me."

"You did not tell me the truth about Bellasis. I do not believe you."

She went out, closing the door, and running down the stairs and along a gallery, fled by way of the newel that led down into the kitchen quarters. A girl saw her pass out across the kitchen yard, and so into the fruit garden. A minute later Luce was in the park. She wanted to be among the trees, alone in the deep green shadows.

CHAPTER XXII

F AIRFAX had ridden over the North Downs, and pulled up his horse on the broomy hill above Lost Lady's Wood.

He saw it as a great grove of beeches, a rolling canopy of foliage supported upon the grey and solemn pillars of the trees. It made him think of some vast green cave with a hundred openings, each space hung with a curtain of shadow and matted with brown leaves. Solemn and strangely still, it seemed the very soul of mystery, some secret grave in Arcady where the voice of a god might be heard like a sudden wind in the branches.

Fairfax rode down to the wood, fastened his bridle to a bough, and walked in among the trees. The place was like the hypostyle hall of an Egyptian temple, crowded with the huge tree boles, lit by the light that filtered in from above, giving a sense of infinite distance, a secret immensity. And it was so strangely still; not a leaf moved. Yet something listened; someone watched, a voice sighed. The wood seemed full of an invisible presence—God.

Walking slowly into the green, sad deeps of the place, Fairfax came to the glade in the heart of the wood. It was carpeted with short close grass, very green and smooth. Overhead the blue sky flowed like a river, and patches of yellow sunlight slept upon the grass. And here, the unexpectedness of life brought him to a sudden pause between the trunks of two trees, the unexpectedness of Luce lying prone upon the grass, her chin resting on her hands.

She did not see him, and Fairfax stood very still. She lay in profile, her elbows on the ground, her head floating a little obliquely on her two hands, and she, too, was very still, a part of the wood and of its mystery. Her eyes were

half closed, one foot crossed over the other, her slim body seeming to float in a pool of sunlight on the turf.

Fairfax had not seen Luce since that day when she had ridden over with Bellasis, and had sat for a few minutes by his bed, yet his thoughts had been full of her. He had dreamed as unhappy men must always dream, creating imaginary meetings, tragic misunderstandings, all the interplay of an uneasy love. He had even pictured Luce married and disillusioned, turning to him at last, and ending one tragedy with another. He had held long and self-created conversations with her, debates in which his unhappy tenderness had set alight a secret tenderness in Luce. Love, so long as it is fed by dreams, never despairs.

But when Fairfax saw the real Luce lying there in the flesh, all the romantic courage went out of him, and he was afraid. His fear rose out of the dread of her dispassionate kindness, the too chilling candour of her calm good will. Poor John—"poor old fellow"—the words that were thrown to a dog! He would have preferred a flash of the eyes, a little tremor of hatred, something that recognized the man's blood in him.

It is probable that John would have drawn back into the darkness of the wood had not Luce turned suddenly and discovered him. She had felt that someone was near her, and had glanced swiftly over her shoulder. She raised herself and sat looking at the man, thinking for the moment that it was Bellasis.

Fairfax did not move. He stood there like some melancholy, tragic figure of romance, the shadows of the trees upon him, his face white and troubled. It was plain to Luce that she had surprised him far more than he had surprised her. The shock of the day's disillusionment was still very strong in her, her father dying, Bellasis dethroned, her mother little better than a procuress. She seemed to see in Fairfax another child of misfortune, a man who loved the green sadness of these trees.

She called to him.

He came forward slowly into the sunlight, a dreamer of melancholy dreams. He did not come close and sit on the grass beside her, but stood three or four paces away looking down at her with a kind of hesitating tenderness.

" I thought I was alone here."

" So did I, John."

Then he said suddenly :

" You are sad ? "

She let her glance go into the deeps of the wood. Her hands were clasped across her knees, her body bent in a beautiful, youthful curve.

" Yes, I am sad. I have reason for being sad."

" It is your father," he said. " Death seems to take the wrong people."

And suddenly she felt a great pity for him, a pity that seemed to fill her with a more subtle understanding. She had begun to suffer ; the eyes of her soul were losing the little hard stare of the eyes of a child, the child whose very innocence may be infinitely cruel. She had judged John so glibly. She suspected now that life could go wrong at the cross-roads without a man being able to help it. She had had a glimpse of what might have happened to herself had not her father told her the truth.

" Won't you sit down, John ? "

His eyes gave a start.

" I am on your ground."

" Mine ? No, I think the wood should belong to anyone who is unhappy."

He sat down in front of her, leaning on his right elbow, his back half turned so that she could not see his face.

" Why do you think me unhappy ? "

" That is not easy for me to answer."

" Do not spare me," he said, " or think that I spare myself. You used to think well of me, Luce."

" My dear ! " she said. And then, " So much has happened."

He remained quite motionless, his eyes hard and thoughtful.

" Yes, so much has happened. You remember how they sent me out of London riding on an ass——"

" We are not going to speak of that," she said, almost sharply. " I think that I understand all that happened to you better than I did. Have two years made no difference in me, John ? "

"You are a woman."

"Yes, I am a woman," she echoed. "I know things now that I did not know then. I looked at men with the eyes of a child."

"I wish you could look at me with the eyes of a child," he said.

He sat up with a sort of scornful abruptness, keeping his back turned towards her.

"But that's impossible! You have found me out. I have found myself out. I used to believe, Luce, that I was a strong man, that I was going to make a name for myself, but those clever gentlemen soon proved to me that I was only an ass. I ran away and hid myself down here, thinking that I would show myself that I could live above and outside everything. I found that I could not do it. Bellasis proved to me that I was as futile and as clumsy as ever."

He did not see her quick, flashing frown.

"Please forget Bellasis."

"It is no privilege of mine to envy him."

"Envy him!"

She laughed, and Fairfax had never heard such laughter from the lips of Luce. He turned and looked, and when he saw her face he looked quickly away.

"Father showed me the real Bellasis this morning, John—and I—despise myself."

She saw John's shoulders droop. She knew that he had guessed that she had loved Bellasis a little.

"Yes, such men achieve greatness—fame," he said presently; "the world bows down to them. I have seen it. They win what the mere modest, fastidious fools never accomplish. They grow rich; they do spacious, notable things; they have many women to love them; they eat and are merry, and when they die there is a fine tomb and much Latin in some church."

This bitterness of his seemed to move her deeply. She leant towards him, but if there was a fire in her eyes, it was tempered with gentleness.

"Would you be such a man, John?"

He did not answer.

"No. Is there not something finely stubborn in us that

will not surrender? It is better to hurt ourselves than to hurt others."

"It is the fool who runs his head into the thorns."

"You speak always of yourself."

"Yes: I am the fool."

"No, I did not mean that."

"But it is true. I am no ship-master; I cannot sail my ship. I sit at home and look at the sea where other men sail out upon the great adventure——"

"Why not venture your ship again?" she said.

He turned and looked at her, and then looked quickly away.

"You do not love me, Luce"

He waited.

"That is true," she said; "I cannot help it, John."

His head was bowed down so that it almost touched his knees.

"It was not to be expected—and yet—it would have helped me."

She moved suddenly close to him, and put a hand on his shoulder.

"My dear, I am so sorry, but I cannot lie to you."

"Never lie to me, Luce. No, but I know that you could not do it. I have been so lonely, so very lonely——"

While she was hesitating his man's pride turned savagely upon his own self-pity. He twisted round, knelt, took her hand and kissed it, and then stood up with resolute and steady eyes.

"Dear God—how could you love me?—a fellow who asks for pity! I stand here, dear, and gird myself. I'll find some way to handle my own ship. Yet—if I had but some flag—some motto——"

"Shall I think of one for you, John?"

"That's what I need—a flag."

She rose and stood looking at the ground.

"I will think, as your friend. Come to me here in two days' time, and I will give you your flag."

CHAPTER XXIII

MY Lady entered Paradell's room in tears, like an ice-bag dissolving in the heat of this angry atmosphere.

"All my life you have flouted me, and now you must needs shame me before the child."

Paradell was very weary, and he lay back on his pillows as though to gain a little strength for the struggle that he knew to be inevitable. He had not expected tears. My Lady had wept but twice in all their married life, and then—as now—they had been tears of anger.

"What's amiss, Kate?"

His tired calmness exasperated her. She blubbered, walked up and down, and kept dabbing at her eyes and cheeks with her handkerchief.

"Oh, the selfishness of men! A woman must always stand aside and see her dear schemes wrecked by the tyrant."

"You are speaking of Luce and of Bellasis," he said.

"Yes, of that——" And she stood and faced him at the end of the bed, crumpling her handkerchief into a wet ball. "Luce was in love with the man; Bellasis was ready to be tamed, and then you must spoil everything."

"Kate, you know what manner of man Bellasis is."

She threw up her head.

"Like other men, no better, no worse. Men are not angels. Do you think that all the love in the world is yours, and that I have no ambition to see Luce well matched?"

"I will do you the honour of thinking that you do not know the man. I do know him, Kate, and what is more I know the gentleman who physics him. This fellow is no man, but a rotten, horrible thing, a cankered apple. Now, is there anything more to be said?"

His thin face had gained a bleak dignity. He had cut her plot in pieces with one stroke of honesty, and he lay and watched her fumbling with the broken ends. Yet he was curious to know how she would behave—whether she would still plan and argue or throw the miserable plot aside with a fine gesture of compassion and sincerity. Could she forget herself for one moment?

"I knew that," she said coldly.

"You knew it!"

"I know, too, that Bellasis is cured."

Paradell's eyes suddenly became terrible. He was transfigured, raised above himself and his failing body by a superhuman and disastrous scorn.

"What words from the mouth of a woman! I think I never knew you, Kate, until this moment. That we should be man and wife and yet such strangers. You astound me. I can no more understand you than I can understand a woman who puts poison in a cup."

She looked at him with oblique hatred. She had meant to push this quarrel into an emotional bog, to get the dying man floundering in it, but his calmness, his shrewd grip of the situation, had held him to the firm ground. It had always been so. He had been so kindly right and just in life, baffling her with a simplicity that had made her hate him.

"So I put poison in the cup?" she said.

He ignored the bitter cut at him.

"The case is beyond argument. What I can do shall be done before I die."

She was waiting to hear what lock and key he would use. He understood.

"I will tell you, Kate. I shall put my last wish upon Luce that she shall marry John Fairfax if she can bring herself to love him. I shall appoint her a guardian other than yourself, no fine gentleman, my dear, but a man whom I can trust. All this shall be put on paper, according to the law. And Luce shall know everything, the why and the wherefore, that the dead hand does not reach out unkindly."

My Lady had dried her eyes. She was as calm as her husband. She curtsied to him.

"My lord has spoken. I have nothing more to say."

She had more to say, but not to Paradell. She went straight to her closet, sat down there and wrote a letter, and with each scratch of the pen she felt that she was tearing a little bit of flesh from her husband's heart. Her mood was suffused with an incredible malice. She meant to have the last word before Paradell died. How she hated him, his yellow, deathly face shining with the integrity of his love for Luce, the smell of his disease, his skull head and his air of deadly rectitude! Always had he baffled her. She would strike him a blow before the end.

When she had written the letter and sealed it, my Lady called for her woman.

"Send Cuttance to me, Blythe, and keep your mouth shut. You shall not regret it."

The groom came up to Catharine Paradell's closet, dusting himself with his hat. He was a sleek man, with shallow eyes, eyes that smiled too easily. He fancied himself with the women.

"Cuttance, you will saddle a horse and carry this letter to Amersham. It must reach Sir Gavin Bellasis's own hands."

"Yes, my lady."

"You will go by Windsor, and bring me a pot of ambergris and a bottle of gillyflower water from the apothecary's there. I do not wish it known that you have been to Amersham. You will make some excuse if anyone questions you, say that you were held in Windsor. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, my lady"

She gave him the letter and two gold pieces.

"Go. And ride hard."

Bellasis had the letter before nightfall. He stood by the oriel in the picture gallery, and as he read it he smiled, a slow, considering smile. Was the thing worth while? Was he sufficiently infatuated to compromise himself? Luce would have money as well as looks.

"The girl loves you," was the refrain of my Lady's letter. "She will struggle a little if you carry her off, but

women love a man who is masterful. But you must act quickly, or the dead hand will have closed the door."

Bellasis stood and considered. He smiled again as he thought of those Christmas days at Farnham and how quickly he and my Lady had tired of that affair. What strange things women were! What was she after? Why was she intriguing for him to marry Luce? Damn it, but the thing piqued him; it was so prettily spiced, so unusual. He would go.

Bellasis ordered out the coach on the morning of the next day. He drove to Windsor, and lodged there for the night. He knew what to do, and thought that he knew how to do it, and he had his letter written to Luce when he drove out of Windsor at about eight in the morning. When they reached the road leading to the park, Bellasis made the coachman pull aside over the turf and draw in under the branches of Lost Lady's Wood. He sent his servant in to Fernhurst with the letter, telling him to sneak in quietly and get hold of Cuttance and the woman Blythe. Then he walked through the wood into the glade and lay down full length on the grass.

Luce was descending the great staircase on her way to meet Fairfax in Lost Lady's Wood, when Blythe met her with Bellasis's letter. She coloured at the woman's familiar poke of the head and air of mystery, and shaking her off, went out into the garden. Alone, she opened the letter and read it.

"LUCE,—My lady—your mother—has written to me that I am forbidden the house, though the reason of it is beyond my understanding. I have been awake all night trying to think of the manner of my offending.

"I must see you. By the soul of my honour I crave this favour. In three days' time I go aboard ship with the Prince and the Duke of Albemarle to fight the Dutch.

"I must speak with you before I go.

"If you can pity me, come to the glade in Lost Lady's Wood.—Your most humble servant,

"BELLASIS."

Luce had never lacked courage, nor was she one to shirk the truth either in speech or action, and the thought

had flashed on her while she was reading Bellasis's letter that Fairfax was on his way to Lost Lady's Wood. The men might meet there, and if it was fated that they were to meet, her presence was a passionate necessity. She had her message for John, and her last words for Bellasis. She did not wish John hurt, either in body or heart, or to find the coincidence misconstrued by two jealous men. The path seemed so plain to her that she did not hesitate, but putting the letter into her bosom went out by the little wicket into the park.

Entering the wood by the gate in the park paling, she did not see the Bellasis coach hidden like some grey mammoth under the trees. A broad "ride" led to the glade, and since the day was cloudy there were no cross-lights through the branches, and the great aisles were masses of shadowy green. Luce heard no sound of movement or of voices. Her heart beat easily, nor did she imagine that she had anything to fear.

When she reached the end of the glade, she saw Bellasis walking up and down with his hands behind his back. His hat and cane lay on the grass, and she noticed that he wore his sword. But chiefly she was surprised by her own calmness, by a sense of indifference to this man who a few days ago had been a partner of her thoughts. She went forward across the grass, watching him with a cold curiosity and a wondering glance at that part of herself that had suffered itself to be touched by him.

Bellasis saw her, and smiled. He came forward with a certain pallid impressiveness, his eyes staring straight at her, and that was the first thing that warned her, the insolence of his eyes. There was no reverence in them, no mystery; they were eyes that handled her familiarly, wantonly, and with a suggestion of triumph.

"My sweet, I thought that you would come."

He was for kissing her hand, but she kept her hands behind her, and held aloof.

"I had to come," she said.

He looked at her queerly, misunderstanding her meaning.

"And so had I. These parental tiffs only make one the more romantic. I knew that you would come."

Her eyes were like black steel.

"Knew! I do not understand you."

"All women say that."

And then he laughed and she saw his face grow haggard and livid with a kind of white ferocity.

"You'll understand this, Luce——"

He was so sudden, and her own surprise so innocent, that he had his arms round her before she could move. His mouth was at her throat. He seemed to breathe like a panting and violent dog.

CHAPTER XXIV

LUCE broke free. She was lithe and quick and very strong, and her strength was more than a mere revolt of the body. She had put a hand in his face, her fingers pressing into his eyes, and Bellasis had given a little snarl of pain.

She stood off in a white flame of anger and scorn, her slim body vibrating, her head thrown back. He saw her vehement, quick breathing, and the play of passion in her throat.

"You evil beast!" she said.

His eyes were full of absurd tears, but the repulse had torn off the last shred of his self-restraint.

"Jade! And I love you."

He came towards her again, but she stood up to him with so fierce and virginal a dignity that he hung back.

"If you love me, my lord, you will not touch me, and if you touch me I shall hate you for ever. I am not yours to be touched."

"Why, what's amiss with my love? Is it the first time that you have been kissed?"

"It is the first time, my lord, and the man whom I may choose to love will never take his first kiss from me as you have done."

"A prude—what! And yet you came to this assignation."

"I came to say 'good-bye' and to meet a friend."

He looked at her aslant, considering how best to take her.

"A friend? Thank you; but before we have finished, my dear, this affair will have gone too far."

She began to be a little afraid, but she did not show her fear.

"What do you mean, my lord?"

"Why, my dear, I shall take what is mine. I know that you love me a little."

"It is a lie," she said. "Do you think that I could love such as you?"

"You had better try," he said. "Women soon come round when they are mastered. I have my coach here in the wood, and presently you will be asking me to drive you to the nearest parson."

She was afraid now, desperately afraid. His eyes were hard and determined; there was a ruthlessness in his passion for her that was like the stealthy and steady approach of a wild beast. She saw those hands of his ready, his mouth hanging open, his eyes set in a stare. And suddenly she turned and ran.

Bellasis caught her before she could reach the end of the glade. He was mad. They struggled together, like two wild things, and this was what Fairfax beheld when he came down through the trees. He saw all the disorder of her limbs, her beautiful liteness bending in despair, her white face that Bellasis was smothering.

And then he heard Luce cry out, like an animal that is vanquished and feels the teeth in its throat.

"John—John!"

Fairfax had no sword, nothing but his fists, and he was still weak after his long illness. He came running with long strides, silently, in a mood to kill. He was close upon them before Bellasis was aware of him.

"John!"

It was a cry of joy. Bellasis said nothing; he threw Luce away, and put his hand on his sword.

Fairfax paused.

"Luce," he said, "get you home, dear."

"You may kill him, John," she said.

"I'll do it, if fists can do it, or with his own sword. Now—will you please go?"

They waited, these two men, eyeing each other, while Luce fled away among the trees. Her hair was over her face, her dress in disorder, and now her anger broke out into tears. She did not go far, but hid herself behind the trunk of a tree while her shaking hands tried to put up her hair and straighten her dress. She could not hear

anything, the sound of men fighting, or the harsh murmur of voices. The wood remained silent—so silent that her fear came back, a fear that asked of the silence to tell her what was happening or what had happened. The heavy, green gloom enveloped her. She remembered that Bellasis had servants with him, men who might be as cynical as their master.

Luce crouched down, listening, looking this way and that into the deeps of the open wood. Once she thought that she heard a voice, an insolent and mocking voice, but she was not sure. And then her consciousness became oppressed by another fear, a fear for John, a fear of Bellasis's baulked rage. She remembered that John had been near death; she had forgotten it in the tumult of her struggle and escape.

The fear brought back her courage. She rose up and went slowly back towards the glade, watching the wood at every step. She had come within sight of the stretch of grass when she saw someone moving, and hid herself behind a tree. The man passed across a little open space. It was Bellasis walking away into the wood with his sword under his arm; he moved quickly, and he did not look back.

When Luce came down into the glade she found Fairfax stretched on his face, his arms crossed under it, and lying very straight and still. So still was he that she thought him dead, and with a quick flutter of horror ran forward and bent over him.

"John!"

She touched his shoulder.

Fairfax turned over and sat up. There was blood on his face, but it was not the blood that shocked Luce, but rather a sort of despair, a bruised shame. John had been thrashed.

She drew back a little, not knowing what to say to him, or how to hide a distress that would add to his humiliation. He could not look at her, but sat staring at the ground between his knees, silent, sick with defeat.

"John, you saved me."

He looked up at her suddenly with a queer little smile.

"Did I do that?"

She glowed. Her eyes seemed to warm to him, and he was aware of her ardent face and the beautiful disorder of her hair.

"Yes, you, a sick man, still weak with your long illness. I—oh—but do not let us speak of it!"

His swarthy face had flushed.

"It seemed to me that I had failed," he said, "as I always seem to fail. The fellow thrashed me, when I should have thrashed him."

"It would have been different," she answered him very gently, "but for your long sickness. You have done me the greatest service of my life."

He was deeply moved by her words, and covering his bruised face with his hands, remained in silent strife with his own soul. Luce sat herself down by him with a wetness of tears in her eyes. She did not love John, and he knew it, but she wanted to help him.

"Do you not believe me?" she asked.

"For the chance that was given me—I thank God," he said, uncovering his face, "—and yet—everything that I touch goes wrong; I am always worsted—and a fool."

"Poor John!" she said very gently.

She could have bitten her lips after those words, for she saw that her pity hurt him.

"Yes—just that—poor John," he said; "it is very bitter to be pitied, Luce, and to know that I deserve it. I came here to-day with great hopes in me."

"Ah—your flag," she broke in quickly; "I have brought it you. I still have it. Someone put it into my hands while I was lying awake at night. I call it the 'Light Invisible,' or 'Never Dismayed.'"

His eyes met hers, almost for the first time.

"The Light Invisible! Tell me more."

"I am not clever, John, but sometimes I think that all of us carry a secret flame—a lamp—burning within us. Sometimes it burns brightly; sometimes it is dim. There seem to be many men who let that flame go out. With others it is never extinguished. I have seen it burning in my father—bravely, patiently, gently."

"Yes, that is true. Tell me more."

"While that flame burns, John, a man is never dis-

mayed. He may go down into the darkness and into dark places, but he will have a light inside him. That alone matters. He cherishes that flame. So long as it burns brightly, fed by the good and brave things we do, we know that no man or woman can put out the flame in us, that we have not failed so long as it goes on burning, even if the world thinks that we have failed."

He sat a long while in silence, thinking.

"That might be argued, Luce. What does the flame feed on but upon a splendid self-conceit? The oil is the admiration that we wring from the unwilling seeds of envy. I think that the only real satisfaction in life is to succeed in spite of our enemies, and to be able to embitter them with our success."

"Bitterness comes back," she said; "if your flame burns brightly there will be no bitterness."

But he was wiser than Luce. He was beginning to understand that a man must end life with a shrug of the shoulders or a sneer. Yet he loved her, and her ardent face and tumbled hair seemed to call for an effort, some mad piece of enthusiasm, some desperate "No" to the "Yes" of an inevitable pessimism. Why should he not go down into the darkest of dark places and see whether he could keep his flame alight? Was there no difference between Whitefriars and Whitehall?

She was watching him with interest, and a little feeling of girlish vanity.

"Well, John?"

"I might begin in the cellar and work upwards. If my flame keeps alight in the cellar——"

"What do you mean by the cellar?"

"A figure of speech, dear. I have an idea that I might learn things in the cellar, how to stab a man in the dark, or to pick a purse."

"John!"

"So that I should know how to prevent him doing the same things to me."

He smiled to himself with a vague grimness, but Luce had turned aside and was listening. She had heard a voice calling in the wood, a faint and distant voice, strangely urgent and eager.

"Miss Luce—Miss Luce."

She touched Fairfax's arm.

"John, listen!"

He, too, heard it, coming nearer, and bringing with it a sense of anguish.

Luce started up. She knew.

"It is my father. Come with me, John."

They went towards the park gate, Luce answering the voice that called.

"I am here, in the ride."

A furlong or so from the gate—Lintern, Sir Philip's man, met them. He looked scared and out of breath.

"Miss Luce—the master is dying——"

"I am coming," she said.

CHAPTER XXV

PARADELL was in great anguish, propped against pillows, his face the colour of dirty parchment, his two hands pressing into his body.

"God, what have I done to deserve this?"

He turned suddenly to the man sitting on a joint-stool beside the bed, a big, bland, blue-eyed man in a black periwig and coat.

"For God's sake, Fairbrother, give me poison. Kill me, man."

Fairbrother's blue eyes clouded. He got up and went to a side-table where there stood phials and a glass, and began, with meticulous care, to mix an opiate. There were two more periwigs in the room—the parson's and the attorney's. The attorney was sitting by the window with a mass of parchment on the table, a little irritable man whose attention was distracted by Paradell's agony. The parson sat at the end of the bed and stared like a sheep at his patron; he had played the toady all his life, and now that the great man needed Christian chastening, Summerscales found it difficult to perform.

"Bear up, sir, bear up. I beseech you to remember Job——"

Paradell looked at him as a dog that had been run over might look at the gaping face of a child.

"Remember your daughter, sir," said the voice of the attorney.

Paradell rallied. The voice of the hard man had helped him more than the voice of the priest. He lay back, stared at the ceiling, his sharp nose like the nose of a corpse, his neck a mere piece of twisted cord. The paroxysm of pain had passed; he seemed to doze a little, and Summerscales, sweating and mopping his forehead, glanced at Fairbrother, who had come to the bedside with a glass in his hand.

"Phew, this is terrible," he said in a fussed voice.

And then, with sudden viciousness :

"You are not going to humour him ? I can't allow it ; as a Christian, I can't allow it."

Fairbrother smiled, a smile of bland and secret scorn. The attorney's voice scratched in.

"Hallo ! God must get his last twist on the man's frame ! There is business to do yet, and he will do it, so don't worry about the deity."

"You are blasphemous, sir," said the parson.

Paradell woke up and looked round him with blind, vacant eyes.

"Where's Luce ? "

"She is coming, sir."

Fairbrother's voice was gentle.

"Drink this."

"It won't kill me, man ? You see——"

"No, no."

He held the glass and supported with one big kind hand Paradell's head.

"That will ease you, sir——"

"I don't want her to see me in pain, Fairbrother. I have much to say to her. She's so sensitive—thank you."

When Luce entered the room she stood a moment on the threshold as though to let her heart steady itself. Summerscales, Povey and Fairbrother made her think of three big blackbirds round her father's bed, watching him while he died. They rose when she entered, and stood looking at her, three solemn Englishmen embarrassed by her emotion.

Luce went straight to the low, four-post bed, and throwing herself upon her knees, reached for Paradell's hands.

"Forgive me, dear ; I shall not leave you again."

Paradell's worn face had lit up. He looked at the three men.

"Will you leave us, gentlemen ? Mr. Povey, I have sent to Shere for Mr. Fairfax ; he should be here very soon."

Luce glanced up.

"But John is here."

"In this house ? "

"Yes, dear ; he came back with me."

Paradell uttered a "God be thanked," and spoke again to the lawyer.

"Tell Mr. Fairfax to come to us. I will send for you, Povey, when I am ready."

"Very good, sir."

Fairfax was walking up and down the dining-room in a state of peculiar exaltation. He had spent a few minutes in a little closet of Sir Philip's, washing the blood from his face and putting his dress in order. The attorney found him standing by the window, looking out across the garden and the park, very quiet and calm, the master of his own soul.

"Sir Philip asks for you, sir."

"For me ? "

"Yes ; will you be so good as to go up ? "

Fairfax's face betrayed a momentary astonishment. He walked slowly out of the room and up the oak stairs, and at the end of the great gallery he saw my Lady standing at a window, biting her nails. She glanced at Fairfax, and then turned away, keeping her back towards him. He knew her to be his enemy and that she would remain his enemy until death took her as it was taking her husband.

Luce was still kneeling beside the bed when Fairfax entered Sir Philip's room. She did not move, and Fairfax crossed over and took the dying man's hands. He looked into Paradell's face and saw a great sadness there, the light of the Flame Invisible that Luce worshipped.

"I am glad of this, John."

"There is so little that I can say, sir."

"You are the one man whom I would have here, John, at the last moment of my life. I know what I know. Sit down on that stool."

Fairfax sat down and let his eyes glance at Luce. But her eyes were hidden ; she was very pale and seemed to be praying, and he felt that her face was too sacred to be stared at.

Paradell smiled.

"I have something to say to you two children. It concerns a wish of mine, a wish in which there is no tyranny, nor would I press it upon either of you."

He looked at Fairfax.

"John, I have always believed in you. I have come to the end of life and I know all the cheats and the illusions that make for tragedy. This wish of mine is that you and Luce should marry."

Fairfax sat very still, so still that he could hear his own heart beating. A curtain flapped; he was conscious of Luce's breathing, of an anguish in her, a choked silence that he seemed to feel and to understand. She had hidden her face in the coverlet, and her bowed head was the head of a suppliant. She had not the heart to speak, or to give a "nay" to her father. John seemed to see that as clearly as he saw the death in Paradell's eyes.

He walked to one of the windows, and stood looking out at the grey sky and all the greenness of the spring. Never had the country looked more sad, more beautiful.

Then he heard himself speaking, and his voice seemed the voice of a stranger.

"I thank you with all my heart, sir—but it cannot be."

There was silence, and he had a sense of struggling with that silence.

"The truth—sir—I have to tell the truth. I love Luce, but I am not the man that Luce can love. Whether I shall ever so manage my life that she will come to love me I cannot say. But marry—now—we cannot."

A still, small and very gentle voice answered him.

"That is honest of you, John."

Fairfax faced about. He saw Luce still kneeling there, her face hidden in her hands, nor did she make any movement or offer to deny what he had said. Paradell looked at her, and was about to speak.

"She loves you very dearly, sir, so dearly that she might offer that which I have not earned and cannot take. I beseech you, do not ask her."

Paradell's eyes filled with a great light.

"That's finely felt and finely said. Luce, my child, here is a man of some honour, a man whom you can trust even if you cannot love him. I would have no marriage between you without love. But since my first wish fails, I have another thing to ask of you, John."

Fairfax came and stood at the end of the bed.

"What I can do, I will."

"It is my wish—John—that you shall be Luce's guardian, and that she shall not be married without your consent. Will you accept that charge?"

"If Luce will accept it. If she will trust me, and believe that though she cannot love me I shall not put myself in the way of the man whom she may come to love. It rests with Luce, sir."

Paradell looked at the girl.

"Luce, what say you?"

And suddenly she rose, with a rush of tears, and running to John, put her arms about him.

"My dear—thank you! How good you are, how generous. Forgive me, but I—I cannot love any man yet."

He kissed her on the forehead.

"I have not asked for it, Luce, but serve you I will."

She kissed him in return.

"The Light Invisible, it is there! I know."

Still weeping she went and kissed her father.

"I trust John," she said; "let him be my guardian."

Paradell sat up and held out his hands to Fairfax.

"My dying charge, John; the dearest thing that I have."

Fairfax went to the head of the stairs and called for Mr. Povey, Fairbrother and the parson. The attorney had his papers ready, and there in Luce's presence John's guardianship was signed, sealed and witnessed, and when it was done Paradell lay back with a great and peaceful weariness. The men went quietly from the room, leaving Luce with him.

Fairfax was the last to leave. He was following the others, but when he reached the gallery he saw my Lady standing there with a face of passionless scorn. She beckoned to him, and he tarried.

"La, but what has happened to your face?" she asked him.

And then she laughed with infinite malice.

"Ah, you noble fellow! Am I to embrace a son-in-law?"

Fairfax felt cold as a frost.

"That honour is not mine, madam. But I am to be your daughter's guardian."¹

"Indeed! Oh, most excellent man! So it is all written nicely on parchment!"²

And then her temper betrayed her.

"You fool, do you think that I shall not find a way to tear it?"³

"You may try, madam," he answered her, "but I think I can prevent you tearing Luce's heart in two."⁴

CHAPTER XXVI

F AIRFAX'S father had been buried in the churchyard of Shere, under a great brick tomb shaded by a yew. There were other Fairfaxes lying at rest inside the church, but John's father had asked to lie under the open sky; and one day in summer the son sat on the father's tomb, strangely at peace with himself and happily sad. Somewhere an old bent man was scything the grass, and the purr of the scythe was like a slumber song for those who lay asleep in the brown earth. The lime trees were full of bees. A wood-pigeon was sitting cooing in a great beech in a field below the churchyard. The little old flint church was almost hidden by foliage, and here and there a window showed a burr of light where a sunbeam struck the glass like an arrow glancing through the leaves. In the meadow below the church lay a great round silver-black pool, edged with water-flags and rushes, and reflecting the white clouds and the blue spaces of the sky.

On the stone of his father's grave were carved the words :
" Only the dead are to be envied."

And this shrewd paradox, that a man is to be counted most happy when he is most sorrowful, or when he has ceased to be either happy or sad, was the truth at the back of Fairfax's thoughts. Ask nothing of life and there will be no disappointments and no regrets. Value nothing so greatly that the fear of the loss of it shall make you afraid.

For in the season of summer Fairfax felt himself empty of all passion, the one compelling force that deludes men into a blind striving, a rushing hither and thither in search of love or riches, fame, or adventure. A very quiet and tranquil mood had come upon him. He had seen Paradell laid in his grave, and Luce in her black dress, Luce the passionless, whose dark eyes looked at him as at a friend.

Life was a momentary emptiness, a holding of the breath,

a little tranquil after-glow before the darkness. He felt very old—as old as time.

In the cool of the evening he walked back along the road to London, and turned up the lane to his house. The day had been hot, and on the lawn in front of the hall he saw a man walking up and down in the shade of a cedar, fanning himself with a rhubarb leaf and carrying a tankard, from which he drank between intervals of flapping with his green fan. He was hot and dusty ; a little swarm of black flies followed him up and down, attracted by the animal heat and smell of him. Fairfax was struck by the thought that here was the halo of the man of heat and of action, a little cloud of flies dancing about the strong animal, as hungry of life and of living as the man who put his red mouth to the tankard.

It was Pegler of Guildford, that lean child of intense curiosities and acquisitive restlessness, an old fellow still young and eager in spite of all his cynicism. He had ridden to London on business, spent three days there, walked about the city with that keen nose of his cocked and sniffing, and remained untouched by the fierce terror that had the city by the throat.

“ Good morning to you, sir. I pulled up here for half an hour for a mug of your ale. My horse had cast a shoe, and my fellow is down at the smithy with him.”

Fairfax pointed to a seat under the cedar.

“ Thank you, but I'll walk about, sir. And perhaps you had better not come too near. I slept under a hedge last night, with my horse tied to a tree.”

“ All the inns shut ? ”

“ Against travellers in the wrong direction. Lord, sir, but the sights I have seen ! Such fear in men's eyes.”

Fairfax looked at him quickly.

“ You have come from London ? ”

“ Does that worry you ? ”

“ Not at all. So the plague is spreading ? ”

Pegler finished his ale, and put the tankard down on the seat. He kept swishing at the flies with his rhubarb leaf, and continued to walk up and down in front of Fairfax, who stood still listening with peculiar interest to what he said.

"So they are afraid?"

"I have never seen such fear," said the lawyer; "it looks at you out of men's eyes; it stares at you out of the windows. All the great folk packing up and running away, coaches and carts thick on the roads, houses shut up. Fear—by God! I had never thought before now how loth men are to die. And the parsons worse than any. I met one fat fellow, who had thrown away his wig, riding in a dung-cart and sniffing at a fistful of burnt feathers."

He laughed.

"What a world! And what a scramble to avoid the next one! Either all our consciences are deuced uneasy, sir, or we have no very great belief in Heaven."

He was amused, scornful, and not in the least afraid.

"I suppose I'm hard, Mr. Fairfax. All my affairs are in order, so I sneaked round and about at night and saw the lanterns and the carts, and bodies thrown out into the streets. Fear, sir, fear! Husband looks upon wife, and wife upon husband, as though each might hide the loathsome and terrible peril. People run away and leave the sick. The sick grow mad and bitter, and sometimes will run and breathe in the faces of the hearty. People hasten by certain houses, holding their noses, and then stop to spit. Every man looks at his neighbour as though he might be a murderer or a thief."

Fairfax's face was very grave.

"Are all men like that?" he asked.

"All? Thank God and our stout English stomachs—no! A few of the nobles and the gentry have sworn to stay; most of the poor stay because they cannot go; and in the villages I saw the country folk armed with staves and pitchforks driving the fugitives into the fields."

"No!"

"It is true. Why, in one hamlet I saw a yeoman fellow stand with a gun and hold up the coach of some great gentleman. Such a sight; women's heads at the windows, my lord and the servants cursing, the women screaming! The coachman would have driven on, but Master Yeoman shot one of the horses."

"Why, then, fear is master—master of us all, Pegler."

"To be sure, sir, and so it is, and always will be in the

mass. When you have seen the ditches full of poor wretches dying of the plague or of starvation, and the coaches thundering by, and every face straining away from London, you will know what fear is. I have always been a sceptic, sir, though a man does not talk much of it, but when the very parsons turn tail on their religion, and Christ lies dying in every ditch—— !”

“It is very terrible,” said Fairfax, “and hardly to be believed.”

“Terrible indeed. Hallo, here is my man with my nag. You will pardon me if I mount and ride ?”

“You will leave me much to think of.”

“There are parts of it that do not bear too much thought, Mr. Fairfax. Still, I have never asked too much either of God or of man. These riddles are beyond me. I keep my accounts in order and save money. Good day to you.”

Fairfax watched him ride off, but the picture that he left behind him was not one that John was likely to forget, nor was he in the mood to forget it. How the self and the animal came out in man ! Self-preservation, a stampede, a snapping of the jaws in the scuffle to escape ! People slinking away from the wretches whom yesterday they called their “dear ones.” The priest who preached of the beauties of Heaven running lest he should eat no more dinners ! The physicians following the rich and the healthy out of town !

But as Fairfax wandered round his garden in the cool of the evening with the clean fields and woods about him, he saw himself as a man standing apart on a hill-top watching a battle, a battle in which he had neither stake nor share. What right had he to judge these people who thought only of themselves and the agony of a great city's terror ? He stood by the old red wall above the pool and watched the sunset, and its reflection in the water. The Light Invisible seemed to burn beyond the hills, and the dark water below him was the shadowy soul of man. And in the darkening woods and upon the hillsides where the sunset streamed he seemed to see the calm white faces of those who were undismayed.

Just before dusk the day gave him a glimpse of one of the pictures that Pegler's tongue had painted in harsh,

dry words. He heard the heavy wheels of a coach in the lane, and the jingling of harness and the voice of a man encouraging his horses as they breasted the rise from the main road. Fairfax walked back to the house in time to see a great black coach labour up from the shade of the elms and beeches. A tall man was walking a little ahead of the horses, a man with a fiery face and a bald head, fashionably dressed, his sword under his arm.

He looked at Fairfax with narrow, irritable, blue eyes, and then attempted a smile, but it was a mere cracking of his stiff features.

"Good evening, sir; I trust that you will excuse me drawing in here."

The coach had stopped, and from its interior came the whimpering of a tired child. The man too had paused, and as Fairfax approached he saw that the stranger had a bruise on his forehead, and that his clothes looked frowsy and crumpled. His face was irritable and set with fatigue. The horses, standing in the shade, drooped their heads with slack ears.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

The red-faced man gave a shrug of the shoulders and then pointed to the coach. "Come and see," said the gesture. One of the curtains was looped back and Fairfax looked in. The coach appeared to be heaped with women and children all lying against each other, asleep in a disorder of exhaustion. He saw a stout woman with a greasy, swarthy face showing half her bosom through the burst laces of her stays. A little fragile, flower-like lady in a blue petticoat sat asleep, clasping a child, her hair fallen about her face.

"You see, sir," said the red-faced man.

"They are sick?"

"God forbid!" and his eyes looked frightened. "We have been three days like this, and for the last day I have been unable to buy food. I had to fight my way through the last village, walking in front of the horses with my naked sword."

And then his face seemed to narrow. He looked at Fairfax like a dog half expecting to be stoned.

"I was going to ask you, sir, if we could pass the night

in one of your barns or under a tree. And some food. My name is Pym, Sir Roger Pym."

"Of course," said Fairfax; "you can come into the house."

The man's tired and angry face seemed to thaw.

"My God, we have found someone who is not a coward! But we will not enter the house."

"It is at your service."

Pym was obdurate.

"No. I would not do you that disservice. The weather is fine. If we could have some straw under one of your great trees. My business has been to get these women and children away into Hampshire, and then I go back. No, I am not one of the poltroons; I do not run away. Molly, my dear, wake up; our troubles are over for to-day. Something to drink and eat, and somewhere to rest."

So Fairfax lodged these frightened people who were flying from the plague, having straw laid for them under a great mulberry tree, and food and drink brought out. It pleased him to see their spirits revive, the ladies going laughing behind a hedge to wash the children and themselves, and then sitting by candlelight and combing and brushing their hair. Fairfax had a big rick-cloth fastened on posts round the tree, so that Sir Roger Pym's people were lodged in a sort of great tent with the leaves for a roof. He did not press himself upon them, but held aloof until Sir Roger Pym must take him to be known to his lady.

"Here is our most kind host, Molly."

The little lady with the blue petticoat and the dark hair had recovered some of her gentle gaiety, but Fairfax thought that he saw fear and a great sadness behind her eyes.

"I cannot thank you, sir, as I would wish. These three dark days have been so terrible."

"A coach seat is not of the softest," said her lord.

"And the heat, and the poor children!"

She looked shyly at Fairfax.

"You have no one dear to you in London?"

"No one," he answered.

Her eyes went to her husband and filled suddenly with tears.

"He is such an obstinate man, so proud."

"There, there, Molly," and Pym bent down and kissed her, "you would not have me a coward. I must go back."

"Why should the few be brave?" she asked him.

"Ah, there we are! And why did you marry me?"

"I know," she said sadly, "it is in your blood. You will do it, and nothing will prevent you."

Fairfax spent an hour walking up and down in the moonlight by the yew hedge, and listening to Pym's tale of the plague. He spoke very quietly and very gravely, but with some bitterness, his description bearing out what Pegler had said concerning the horror of selfishness that had swept over the city.

"Let the women and children go down into the country, but that we men whom the poor people look to for help and guidance should run away is nothing but base cowardice. I have seen men who have fought gun to gun with the Dutch run away like wild beasts from the pestilence."

"So you will return?"

"Most certainly."

He was grim over it, and Fairfax felt that Pym was thinking of his wife and children, while he, John Fairfax, had no one to leave, no one save Luce—who did not love him.

"There is work to be done?" he asked.

"Work, my God, man, yes, if only to show a brave face."

Fairfax seemed lost in thought. He went the whole length of the yew hedge without speaking.

"Shall you ride back by the road?"

"I may do."

"Because—I have it in my mind that I shall go to London, and it will be a pleasure for me to ride with you."

Pym turned sharply, and looked at him in the moonlight.

"Why, to be sure, the pleasure would be mine too! Where shall you lodge in London?"

"In some poor street, I think," said Fairfax very quietly. "I may as well be in the thick of the fight."

His mind was fixed upon the adventure, and on the following day he rode over to Guildford and spent some hours with Mr. Pegler, putting his affairs in order. His guardianship of Luce was the one matter that troubled

him, and on the Sunday he took horse for Fernhurst, purposing to tell her all that was in his mind. He found Luce alone in the belvedere on the terrace, dressed all in black, and still greatly sad. My Lady did not appear. She had made herself a woman of mystery since Paradell's death.

Luce heard all that Fairfax had to say to her, and her eyes were kind.

"Do not let the thought of me hinder you, John. I am very proud that you should do this."

She was very calm, so calm that the lover in John stood aside, realizing that the thought of his going did not trouble her heart. She was in her season of austerity, absorbed in memories, holding with devotion to a sorrow that seemed to her sacred. If she felt lonely, she welcomed her loneliness, embraced it, accepted it with an almost religious fervour. No young widow could have grieved more devotedly than Luce Paradell grieved for her father.

When Fairfax said "good-bye" to her, Luce rose and kissed him, and it was like the kiss of a nun.

"God bless you, John," she said.

And he went away thinking that Luce would never love him.

CHAPTER XXVII

THERE was a pot of musk in the window that overlooked the river. The pot stood on the table where Fairfax sat and wrote in his journal, coatless, his shirt open at the throat because of the August heat. The room had a second window opening on the end of Lantern Lane in the parish of St. Bridget, and since the house in which Fairfax lodged was set forward and at an angle, the window gave him a view of the lane and all that happened in it.

Fairfax had finished an entry in his journal, and he put down the quill, and, with his arms folded upon the table, watched the tide ebbing in the river. The water went by like oil, flowing without a ripple, in colour a greyish yellow under a heavy and suffused sky. There was no air moving, and not a boat to be seen upon the river. The southern horizon was the colour of lead, hung with heat and a promise of thunder.

Fairfax re-read the last entry in his journal :

"Mrs. Barbara Rackstraw died of the plague this morning."

He smiled faintly, picked up the pen, and began to write.

"They tell me that the King is at Salisbury. The Court fled from Whitehall long ago. The Duke of Albemarle and my Lord Craven remain in the city ; so does Sir Roger Pagan, my uncle."

He hesitated, with pen poised, his eyes looking into the grey distance beyond the river, as though waiting for his thoughts to clothe themselves in a beautiful and grave sadness. He was in the presence of death, a death that had touched him very deeply.

He resumed his writing.

"Here was the light of the Flame Invisible. Of this most notable and noble woman I write with a sad heart. She had no fear. She drove out daily in her coach, bearing

food to those who were foodless, carrying her courage like a lamp into the darkness. What had the world to say of her?

"What will the King say of her death?"

He paused again, looking out of the window and watching a boat pulling up sluggishly from the direction of Blackfriars Stairs. The oars moved very slowly and seemed to hang heavily in the water, the men rowing listlessly and without life.

Fairfax returned to his journal.

"I know not at this moment whether to call her end happy or sad. She was greatly loved, and she loved with greatness. Of my own thoughts it is difficult to speak, even in the privacy of this book. There was a time when I loved her, and somehow in my heart I know that I still love her, and that I am grateful to her for the example that she has shown me in these days of terror. Were I the King, I should be full of a great anguish, remembering that she had remained while I had fled."

He sat back in his chair, and seemed lost in thought. A great calmness possessed him as he looked out upon the river and watched it ebbing towards the sea. The room with its plastered walls, its bed, table, and oak chairs, was a little cell of silence in the greater silence of the city, the silence of the living death. Fairfax saw a wreath of blue smoke drift past the window, and he heard the faint crackle of burning wood, a sound that told him that the watchmen were lighting a fire at the end of the lane to set the heavy air moving between the houses. There were many red crosses on the doors of Lantern Lane, and many empty houses in it.

He wrote a few more words.

"My head is full of the face of Luce. Now that I am in the midst of death I know how deeply I love her, and with the love of a grown man—a man who has suffered. Thank God, I have no fear, yet I am surprised at my own courage. Do they not say that Death ceases to be terrible when he is faced? And yet I cannot keep from wondering whether Luce thinks of my danger. I am selfish enough to wish that it would trouble her a little. Her last letter was so calm."

He turned in his chair and listened, for someone was climbing the stairs. The footsteps came up slowly and

clumsily, the treads of the stairs creaking in the silence of the house. A hand knocked at the door.

"Come in."

An old woman stood on the threshold, her hat tied on with a length of white muslin, the ends left long so that she could hold them over her mouth and nostrils. She was very thin, with light, restless eyes. The bones of her nose looked as though they were pushing through the yellow skin.

"I've come to tell you I am going, Mr. Fairfax."

"Going?"

The house belonged to her, and she had been the only soul left in it when Fairfax had come to lodge there.

She looked at him with a sort of defiance.

"My daughter has sent for me to Tottenham. Her man is at sea, and she is in bed, expecting her first child. I don't know whether you will be wishing to stay, sir."

"Yes, I shall stay, if you are agreeable."

She made no comment, but kept fidgeting with her hands.

"The cross is up next door. It may be that you can get Nan Dyer to do for you. Will you have the key?"

Fairfax was counting out some money.

"I can look after myself; here are two guineas in advance."

He rose and gave her the money, and she handed him the key. Then she turned and went slowly down the stairs, and picking up a bundle in the entry, passed out into the lane.

Fairfax returned to his table by the window overlooking the river, but his thoughts had been disturbed and brought back to the more immediate realism of the life about him. He heard the fire crackling in the throat of the lane, and suddenly, from the window of some stricken house, came a crying: "O Lord, have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy!" He was conscious of a little spasm of pity, even though he was growing strangely accustomed to the sights and the sounds of the plague, for they had been in his eyes and ears for weeks, and become almost like the quiet happenings of a normal day. Yet the death of Barbara Rackstraw had broken through this apathy of the senses. He was weary, lonely, vaguely afraid, and to combat his uneasiness he turned over the leaves of his journal and read some of the entries.

"My first day in the city. The weather most amazing hot. The streets empty of people, and nearly all the houses and shops shut. Red crosses, and 'Lord, have mercy upon us,' on many doors. I saw searchers and keepers with their red wands."

"The place is full of the noise of the horns of the filth-rakers. Bells tolling all last night."

"There are now three red crosses in our lane. Mr. Blyth is dead, with his wife and three children."

"Pym gave me a letter to Mr. Marbury, of St. Bridget's. I find this priest a very quiet and courageous man. Thank God, he will find me work."

"I am in charge of the handling of the victuals. The store is in the school-house, and I shall spend many hours there. The apathy of the poor people is pitiable; their eyes are dead and their faces vacant. They seem beyond fear. The very appetites and passions are dead, and I hear of no thieving."

"A man came mad drunk to-day to the school and tried to seize two loaves of bread. I had to throw him into the street."

"Called on Pagan. A very fine gentleman, my uncle. He walks the streets daily and orders his life as though there were nothing amiss. A great captain for the encouraging of the souls of others. He understands my 'madness,' and I his."

Fairfax had picked up the quill to make a correction in one of his entries when he heard someone calling to him from the lane.

"Mr. Fairfax, are you within?"

He rose, and going to the other window with its oblique glimpse of Lantern Lane, saw a little man in a cassock standing by the doorway of the stone house across the way. This was Mr. Marbury of St. Bridget's, a "mean-looking man," according to the tongues of the women, undersized, with a big, lumpy head, and a skin that had the appearance of being covered with dust. He was standing with his back to the carved oak door of the stone house, and on the door was the red cross of the pestilence, a cross whose invisible image Mr. Marbury carried like a crusader on his breast.

He smiled up at Fairfax.

"I am going round the parish," he said.

Fairfax put on his coat and hat and went down to him. It had become their custom to walk every evening through the streets and lanes and to show themselves in every court and alley and to "walk cheerfully," as Mr. Marbury put it, "for the good of men's stomachs." The little man was talking to the fellow who had been feeding faggots on to the bonfire at the end of the lane, and who was leaning on his pitchfork and staring at the fire as though he saw the picture of his own coffin in it.

"You are not in hell yet, Tom," said the parson.

The man shifted his feet, and moving one hand from the fork, ran his fingers across his groin. Marbury noticed the act and understood it.

"A wad of tobacco in a breeches pocket makes a fine bubo, Tom."

"So it does, sir."

The man grinned.

"Keep a pebble in both pockets, my lad, and put God in your stomach."

He walked up the lane with Fairfax as though he were off on a country stroll along that ribbon of stones between the overhanging fronts of the houses, a Via Dolorosa that Fairfax would never forget. It had built a pathway in his brain and was made up of memories that were so vivid that in the years to come he often felt himself walking there and brushing the doorposts with his shoulders. He saw the black gables overhanging against the sultry blue of the sky, the little dark windows that seemed to gape for air, the watchers guarding the doors marked with the red crosses, here and there some hopeless figure slouching in an entry or sprawling on the cobbles with its back against a wall. Fear—always fear—and an immense apathy, a sultry silence. At night the lanterns were unlit, and you saw the stars looking down between the houses, or the moon like a sick face. People lay in the lane because of the heat, but when they heard the wheels of the cart that went round for the dead, and saw the glare of the links, they hid themselves in the houses. Fairfax could remember when the lane had been as filthy as a

laystall, with the rubbish thrown out of doors and windows by people whom fear had turned into slovens, and the breath of the place had made him keep his windows closed. Mr. Marbury had fought this filthy, hopeless apathy. He had gone out with a rake, a barrow, and a fearless tongue, and Lantern Lane had become clean.

They came up into Fleet Street, went as far as the bridge, turned back and walked to the Temple, and spent half an hour strolling under the trees in the King's Benchers' Walk. There was gloom everywhere, a few people moving as though they had taken leave of the world and were loitering in a prison yard on the morning of their execution. Returning by way of Whitefriars they passed the mouth of a court where a little crowd of battered wretches were drinking themselves into oblivion. A woman had stripped herself naked save for her smock, and was dancing and waving a pair of old red breeches. And, even while they were watching her, she faltered and stood still, her red face turning a dirty white, her eyes staring at nothing.

"Moll's drunk," said a man.

Suddenly she began to scream and to curse.

"It's got me! Damn you all, I'm done for!"

In a kind of frenzy of spite and of malice she went staggering round, caught a man with a brown beard, and kissed him. Fairfax saw the man's furious, scared face. He struck the woman with his fist, and she fell into the gutter. The whole crowd fled, leaving her lying there.

Mr. Marbury walked into the court and bent over the woman. She lay in the gutter and looked at him like a frightened and stupid animal.

"Where is your lodging, Moll?"

"Lord, it's the little parson!" said she.

"The parson it is, Moll."

"Aren't you afraid? It's got me. I'm sick. Did you see those silly sots running like a drove of pigs?"

She laughed, and sitting up, put her face close to his.

"Aren't you afraid?" she repeated.

"No, I am not afraid."

"Feel so damn godly and good that the devil can't get you! I'll make you afraid."

She spat in his face, and then sat and stared at him with a gradual and half childish awe, for Mr. Marbury wiped his face with his sleeve and smiled at her.

"You can do it again, if you like," he said.

She burst into rough, wild tears, and catching his hand, kissed it.

"Oh, I'm bad, I always was bad. Why didn't God let one of these rogues knife me before I did a thing like this? I'll go and throw myself in the river."

"You will do nothing of the kind," said Marbury. "I am going to help you up the stairs, and I shall send the surgeon and Sister Agnes to you."

And so he did, returning to Fairfax with a queer smile upon his face, and a sort of blind light in his eyes.

"I never had my chance till the plague came," he said as they walked on together. "I was always a fool in the pulpit, and I'm ugly—deuced ugly."

He laughed, opening his chest as though he were showing his heart.

"I loved people, and they laughed at me. Lord, but I am happy these days! I feel that I am some good."

Fairfax sat at his window overlooking the river and watched the sunset draw the yellow threads of its net along the black surface of the water. He sat there till the dusk fell, thinking of Marbury's grotesque figure and great heart, of Barbara Rackstraw and her brave end, of Luce in her black dress listening to the quiet breathing of the Surrey woods. A great tenderness stirred in him. He seemed to touch some mystery and to feel that he was parted from it only by a little covering of tremulous flesh. The Invisible Flame was very close to him, burning like a mystic heart, a human heart in the hand of God.

"Even that poor trollop saw it," he thought; "she saw it in Marbury's eyes."

Presently another thought came to him.

"Why do men speak of the quest of happiness? What is happiness? It is the air we breathe without knowing it, or the dappling of sunlight in the deeps of a wood which is so quiet and still that we pass by without seeing it. It is ourselves—when we forget ourselves."

CHAPTER XXVIII

FROM the shade of the beeches of Lost Lady's Wood the park flowed like a soft sea polished by the September sunlight, with a tinge of gold in the greens of the grass and the bracken. The dry, hot summer had brought the colour changes of an early autumn, and nothing but the heavy dews had saved the turf from being burnt as brown as the hide of a deer. Luce stood by the gate in the park fence, a fence of split oak green with lichen and moss. The boughs of the beeches stretched far out over the fence, which was like a ribbon sharply separating the brown-black floor of the beech wood from the yellow-green grass of the park.

Luce's hands rested on the top of the gate. They were holding a letter, and in the diffused light under the trees, the paper, her hands and face, looked all of the same whiteness. She was reading the letter for a second time, and reading it at her leisure and in the silent place, though the last words on the page bade her "Read quickly and burn this when you have read."

For there was a great calmness in this letter of John's. He seemed to be standing beside her under the beeches, talking in a quiet voice, the voice of a man whom nothing could dismay. She could see him sitting at the table by the window overlooking the river, and writing calmly of all that he had seen. He described everything to her, simply, vividly, his rooms, Lantern Lane, the river, the streets, Mr. Marbury, the schoolhouse where he saw to the distribution of the food, the sound of the bells that were always tolling, the fires in the streets, the heat, the dull, apathetic faces, the emptiness, the fear, the rumbling of the carts that carried away the dead. He was in the midst of it, and she had a feeling that he was not afraid, nor was his serenity the stoicism of a fatalist.

His personal message was full of a quiet tenderness.

"I thank God that you are safe at Fernhurst. Nor have

I any fear that death will cause me to fail in the trust that your father placed upon me. It is very strange, but I have no fear of the plague."

"Nor I," said she to herself, folding the letter and slipping it under her dress.

For this letter seemed to have given her the picture of a man who was half a stranger, a man who had ceased to be the familiar figure of the last ten years. She had discovered an unexpectedness in Fairfax, a shadow of mystery, almost of romance. He had eluded her, vanished, and then suddenly reappeared at a distance, a calm and valiant figure moving through the vicissitudes of a great tragedy.

"I am glad," she said to herself; "my love—or the lack of it—does not matter to him so much."

But this was not the truth, for Luce was a woman. She wanted John to go on loving her, even though she could not give him her love as a recompense. The "Faithful John." She had created a tradition, a tradition of the heart.

When Luce reached the knot of Scots firs in the knoll that gave a view of the Fernhurst garden, she saw the great lawn where the mulberry tree grew stippled with little moving figures. There were twenty or more of these brilliant dolls moving about the green stage with the sunlight shining on their gay dresses. The mulberry tree held a group of them sheltered under its shade. She saw my Lady's black silk gown in the centre of this posy. Catharine Paradell had a house-party. The Brunkers had coached over from Salisbury. The Foleys, driven from their fine new house in Piccadilly, were finding a little quiet, arcadian gaiety in places where the plague was not. The Disturnals were here from Farnham. Two or three county families had come in for the day. The gentlemen were shooting partridges in the valley on the other side of the hill, and Luce could hear the occasional popping of the guns. She had resented the coming of the crowd, and her mother's cynical passage into her second youth. She resented the unconsciousness of these people, this atmosphere of a *Fête Galante*, the silly feverishness of it all, and sitting down among the bracken under the firs, she drew her knees up under her chin, the favourite pose of the long-legged child, and watched these distant figures with thoughtful eyes.

Catharine Paradell was in black ; the perfunctoriness of her mourning did not attempt to hide an air of triumph, even of expectancy. Her chestnut hair and slanting, wanton eyes seemed to have warmed with the autumn. Her face was powdered, her lips reddened, and she was patched on her plump, cold, unwrinkled skin. She laughed and coquetted, feeling herself freed from the restraint of a lifelong quarrel with a man who had exasperated her with his kindness, his patience, and his unimpeachable good sense.

" There is no one to contradict me," was her cry ; " no one who expects me to be better than myself."

Old Brunker was sitting chatting to her, for he had not gone out with the guns. Three or four rather stupid women sat and listened to the Court gossip that this pock-marked and swarthy old gentleman poured out with an air of wicked innocence. He had great bushy eyebrows, a huge aquiline nose, a droll yet lascivious mouth. He loved shocking dull people, and to see the women hug themselves with guilty delight and exclaim : " La—what a man ! I never did hear the like of it ! "

My Lady was the very partner for such a character. She, too, had an audacious tongue, and no reverence for anything.

" How many queens did you say there were at Salisbury ? "

" On my honour, madam, I said nothing about such a scandal. The fact is, the Court is puzzled, troubled."

" Is the Privy Purse empty ? "

" I assure you, my dear lady, that the state of the Privy Purse does not worry us so much as the state of the King."

The county ladies opened their eyes like dolls.

" La, sir, we know that His Majesty is a very gay man."

" Gay, my dear—more than gay."

Old Brunker screwed up his mouth.

" Upon my honour, he has not looked at a woman for a month. He has become a devoted husband. He will not hunt, or fool, or dance, or take our money at cards. Melancholy—a most kingly melancholy ! Even you, madam"—and he turned to the widest-eyed of the gentlewomen—" even you, madam, might by some chance lift of the petticoat show him a very charming leg, and I vow he would not notice it ; no—it might be no more than a knuckle-end of mutton."⁴⁴

"La, Mr. Brunker!" said the lady, shocked and liking it.

There was among them a lady of severe views, a gentlewoman who had never been more than the knuckle-end, whose virtue was a thing of sinews.

"For shame! I wonder that you can giggle. The King had cause for melancholy."

"How so?" asked old Brunker, looking at her with sardonic innocence.

"Is not the state of the poor city enough to make His Majesty sad?"

"Oh, I see, madam; oh, I see. He grieves because of the plague?"

"So many poor wretches dying."

His eyes met Kate Paradell's, and suddenly they began to laugh. The lady of sinews looked piqued.

"Sir, you have a frivolous mind."

"My dear lady, His Majesty may be sick, but it is not because London lies and stinks in the gutter. Why should he be cut to the heart? Why should I, or you? I look at it as a just retribution, even as a merciful dispensation, a judgment upon London. The blood of Charles the Martyr is being avenged."

He made a solemn grimace which the country ladies mistook for a sign of emotion.

"There is a problem to puzzle your sweet heads: what it is that has made the King suddenly become like a moon-struck poet in a play."

"And what is the reason, think you, dear Mr Brunker?" asked the lady of the very blue eyes.

"That is the question we have been asking ourselves, my dear madam, for the past three weeks, and even my Lady Castlemaine seems as puzzled as the rest of us."

"Horrible woman!" said the lady of sinews.

Mr. Brunker looked at her with wicked eyes.

"Madam, you express yourself with such exactness, such remarkable veracity. I might even say 'voracity.' Hallo, here come the pop-guns."

The gentlemen had returned, very hot and very thirsty, and showing a desire for the shade of the great mulberry tree. Five out of the six of them were married men; they

ignored their wives, and grouped themselves round old Brunker and my Lady. Sir Peter Foley, whose fiery and foolish face had made Brunker liken him to a drunken parrot, stood over Catharine Paradell.

"My dear lady, I do not know which sensation is the more exquisite—the shooting of your partridges or our return here to be transfixed by the beautiful arrows of your eyes."

He was a great coxcomb, and talked as though his voice came out of the top of his head.

Brunker mimicked him :

"Or to drink a draught of my Lady's ambrosian ale."

"Peter," said the voice of his lady, "do go and change your shirt, dear ; you are always such a man to sweat."

"Be quiet, you fool."

"Tut, tut, sir ; it is a manly and noble thing to sweat. Your good lady——"

A servant came clinking glasses on a tray, and Foley escaped both from his wife and old Brunker by remembering his thirst.

"Silly jade ! Half wine and half water for me, Tom. Madam, I drink your health."

But Brunker could not let it be.

"My dear sir, let me implore you to go and change your shirt. A man of your age and colour——"

"My age, sir ! my colour ! What do you mean ? "

"Be quiet, you silly creatures," said my Lady ; "Sir Peter will always be young."

"My dear lady, how very charming of you."

He was bowing, mollified, thinking he had triumphed over the cynic.

"A perennial fat-head," said Brunker, patting a spaniel that had come forward to be petted.

They were all talking in chorus now, and the loud voices of the country gentlemen constrained Mr. Brunker to be silent. The ladies chattered and flirted, and sipped little basins of tea with which my Lady had surprised them. Fat John Disturnal purloined his wife's cup, tasted the new beverage, and being a man of coarse manners and prejudices, spat it out upon the grass.

"John !" said his lady.

"When I want physic I'll go to the still-room."

Sir Peter Foley was quarrelling with the plague, holding the Londoners responsible for it, and grumbling because he had been turned out of his house. He found Catharine Paradell ready to sympathize with him and to agree that "it was deuced vexing for a gentleman to be inconvenienced because a lot of dirty shopkeepers could not keep their own kennels clean." And the Court compelled to go gallivanting into the country, and the dead season coming on, and the play-houses shut up! And all the hackney coaches spoilt carrying sick wretches to the pest-houses. What was the world coming to? How could a man of fashion be expected to live?

Luce heard old Foley screaming like a parrot as she came across the grass. She disliked this old man; she disliked his muddy eyes, his raddled red nose, his coxcombry, his stupid selfishness. She diverged towards that part of the group where Mr. Bruncker was still fondling the spaniel. Bruncker was an old ruffian, but she preferred him to these loud men who talked from the pit of the stomach.

Old Foley, sighting her, smiled like a hot coal, and made her an elaborate bow. She pretended not to see it, and held on towards Mr. Bruncker. And he, a connoisseur of women, was aware of her bitterness, her beautiful, pale austerity, the secret warmth concealed under the skin, her dark eyes swimming in a clear and brilliant whiteness.

"Humph!" said old Foley. "She walked by me that time, by gad! A very cold young woman, your daughter."

"Yes, Luce is ice," said the mother.

Bruncker had risen and offered his stool to Luce. He was smiling.

"I'm a devil," he seemed to say, like some wicked old raven, "but I'm not a fool, my dear."

Luce took the stool.

"Did you shoot any partridges?" she asked him.

"No; I have been shooting Cherubim and Seraphim—under the tree."

She gave him a little upward, sparkling look.

"Talk, please, talk hard. I like to listen to you."

"Cursed is the man—or the woman—my dear, whose mouth is full of questions."

CHAPTER XXIX

ON the first Sunday in September the spirit moved John to walk out into the country, and he took that most familiar of familiar ways, the lane that led to the old park of Marybone. He had a desire to see the house of Barbara Rackstraw, to wander again in the garden, to pay a silent homage to the woman whose life and whose death had been full of the sweet, sad perfume of tragedy.

Walking between the high hedgerows, he thought of their pilgrimages in the dark, the struggles with his own wild youth, those moments of anguish when he had watched and waited for the King. The fever was past and over. The lips that had tantalized him were dead ; the glorious voice silent. And an inexpressible sadness flowed through him, at the thought that so beautiful a body should suffer the horror of decay. Dry, crackling age did not matter. It was the mere fall of the dead leaf, inevitable, timely. But this body of youth, with all its sweet graces clotted into a little stain in the earth, all the loveliness of it melting into something that was loathsome !

" Fire," he said ; " let us be burnt up with fire."

Breaking through into the park, he directed his steps to the gap in the hedge that gave a glimpse of the garden. He could see the sun-dial and the withering grass dry and brown and all silvery with seed. The place was very silent, and he judged it to be deserted. Climbing the fence, Fairfax pushed through into the garden, and standing under the shade of an old holly, looked at the familiar house. The casements were closed, the brightly-coloured curtains drawn ; the twisted chimneys showed no smoke. The body of the old life had gone, but the spirit seemed to linger as a sad, mysterious presence, a perfume, the memory of a voice, of a woman's eyes.

Fairfax was walking across the grass towards the sun-

dial when he was surprised by the most unexpected of sounds: the thin, sweet, hesitating voice of Barbara Rackstraw's virginal. It was as though her ghost were touching the keys, and Fairfax stood very still, his eyes on the window of the music-room. Someone was playing the music of one of her songs, and playing it with such sadness, such pathos, that Fairfax's astonishment changed to a sudden awe. He uncovered his head. He was almost ready to believe that rumour had lied to him, and that Barbara was not dead, but seated there in that noble room with her hands moving upon the keyboard. He noticed that one of the curtains had been drawn aside, leaving a narrow space through which it would be possible to see the player of the virginal. An extraordinary curiosity made him walk across the lawn and look in through the lattice at the musician.

It was a man. Fairfax could see his periwig, black coat and white collar, but his face was hidden by the curls of his wig, nor had John time to gain more than a momentary glimpse of him before he withdrew his hands from the virginal, turned sharply on the stool, and putting back the curtain, looked with angry surprise at the intruder. For some seconds these two men stared steadily into each other's eyes. The recognition and the strangeness of it held them motionless and mute. The man seated at Barbara's virginal was the King.

He rose and opened the lattice. The anger had gone from his face, and in its place John saw an intense sadness.

"So it is you, John Fairfax."

John grew suddenly confused. He felt that he had surprised the King in one of the most tragic moments of his life, and that his curiosity had blundered.

"Your Majesty, I ask your forgiveness."

He bowed and turned to go, but Charles called him back.

"Mr. Fairfax, there is nothing for me to forgive. Will you tell me what brought you here?"

Fairfax hesitated. If any bitterness had remained in his heart, he forgot it utterly under the eyes of this man who had ridden a hundred miles to touch the notes of Barbara Rackstraw's virginal. He felt that he had some understanding of Charles's tragedy, though there were

patches of darkness in it that were obscure and almost sinister.

"I came because of a memory, your Majesty, and because I think that I am grateful to this very noble woman."

"Ah!" said the King very quietly. "Tell me."

And again Fairfax hesitated. He was afraid of appearing to lay a rough, smug hand upon a possible remorse.

"Your Majesty——"

"Put etiquette aside, John. Are we not men?"

He stepped out through the window, and slipping a hand under Fairfax's arm, began to walk to and fro between the sun-dial and the house.

"It will help me to talk to you, John," he said with quiet candour; "I have so few friends to whom I can show my heart. I rode here from Salisbury, in secret, to see the house where she had lived and died. Tell me how you came here?"

"I walked, sir."

"From London?"

"I have a lodging in the City. I had almost forgotten it, but you should not come near me, sir."

He made as though to draw away from the King, but Charles held his arm.

"Do you think I fear the plague, man?"

"No, sir."

"It would be so easy, so pleasant to die. And what are you doing in London, John?"

"Helping, sir."

"To fight the plague?"

"Yes."

Charles's swarthy face seemed to grow more kind and sad.

"Did you ever see her, John, driving out in her coach into the foul lanes, the coach filled with bread and pity?"

"Never, sir."

"I wish to God I had been some wretch lying in the gutter, to behold the valour and the beauty of her."

He could say no more for the moment, and John felt the grip of his fingers on his arm. Charles was fighting a spasm of savage emotion, jaw set hard, his forehead

all wrinkles. Fairfax dared not look at him, for this agony was sacred.

"She died very nobly, sir. I have been grateful to her for the beauty of her courage."

"Man, I envy you. And what a tangled and tragic thing life is! I ran away, John. Do you not marvel at it?"

"It was not fear."

"No; a strange storm of love and hate, of policy, tenderness, cunning. Let us leave it there—in the darkness—the tragedy of a heritage of hate. To-day, as I walk in this garden, John, I cannot believe that she and I quarrelled. . . . Yes, we quarrelled."

He smiled like a fanatic, putting his hands into the flame of his remorse.

"I bade her come away into the country. She refused, and refused with tears and with anguish. Her love was greater than mine, more unselfish. She was showing me the life, and I lost it, because I hated—hated these people who had killed my father."

He stood a moment, staring at the window of her room, his eyes shining with a sudden great tenderness.

"And now I have lost her. I think that she was the one great and good thing that ever came into my life. For the moment, John, I stretch out my hands blindly, and everything is darkness."

Fairfax was deeply moved.

"But it is yours, sir, the great memory, the splendid spur."

Charles raised his head and looked at him with a tragic, yet almost whimsical, helplessness.

"You do not know me, my friend. Some of us are so damnably human. I had two threads in my life, and one of them is broken. They were always in a tangle, these two, and I think if she had lived she would have broken this other thread. Well, it is over, finished. Is there anything that I can do for you, John?"

"Nothing, sir, I thank you."

"No ambition?"

"I can think of nothing, your Majesty. I am so much in the presence of death——"

Charles laid a hand on his shoulder.

"I like you, man. And somehow—I envy you. Come to me if ever you are in need. There are some things that even a king does not forget."

Fairfax bent down and kissed the King's hand.

"I thank your Majesty. It may be that some day I shall need your kindness."

Fairfax walked back to Westminster in the cool of the evening, his thoughts full of the King sitting alone in that deserted house. The picture was a contrast of lights and shadows, and it seemed to John that the man, Charles Stuart, stood half in the light and half in the shadow, a sad, distraught, hesitating figure, lost at the cross-roads. There was a suggestion of lightning playing behind the clouds, a sense of mystery in the stormy landscape. Fairfax could not forget the strange glimpse that Charles had given him of an almost fanatical hatred, a hatred so fierce and secret that even the love of Barbara Rackstraw had been unable to conquer it.

Fairfax called at Sir Roger Pagan's house in St. Martin's Lane, and was welcomed by Purvis.

"Still at your post, Purvis?"

"And where else should I be, sir?"

"Long Marston over again. Is my uncle in?"

"In the garden, sir. Will you go through to him?"

Old Pagan was sitting under the lime tree, reading a book of sermons. But it was dull stuff, empty of all the heroic madness that makes men drunk with the divine folly. He got up, throwing the book upon the table, glad to welcome the human honesty in John. They had come to know each other very intimately during the days of the plague, and each had grown to love the streak of generous madness in the heart of the other.

"Sermons, John, sermons! Mortal pains in the stomach. Your shoes are dusty."

"And your eyes sharp, sir. I have been in the country, if you call Marybone the country."

"Sit down. Is her house shut up?"

"You guessed that at once."

"I went there myself two days ago. So there was no need for the question!"

John's solemn face did not surprise him, but there was more than he guessed behind the solemnity.

"I found the King there."

"The King!"

"All alone, and playing upon her virginal. He had ridden all the way from Salisbury, and in secret. We talked together."

Pagan's eyes had grown deep and sad.

"There is a tragedy, John. And how did he seem?"

"Broken-hearted."

"Poor lad! I still think of him as a merry rogue of a boy. And what a heritage! What a Prince of Denmark—and Ophelia dead!"

Fairfax looked questioningly at his uncle.

"He said many things to me. He talked as though he must open his heart to someone. But this hatred——"

"He spoke of that?"

"Yes."

"What madness!—and yet perhaps—not to you. There are not six people in the kingdom who suspect it. History may never record it. The thing has troubled me, John, troubled me mightily. The man is my king; I have hated those whom he hates—and yet——"

"We are Englishmen, sir."

"There's the rub. I sometimes wonder whether this man whom the crowd thinks an easy, dissolute fool has not set himself to humiliate England, to take his revenge for that January day. Before God, I do not know."

It was growing dusk when Fairfax left Pagan's house and walked back towards Lantern Lane. He followed the Strand, thinking how it resembled a street in some accursed and deserted city, the great houses shut up, everywhere a strange silence. Such people as passed went by on the other side, hurrying along and keeping well away from the doors of the houses. Some wore bandages that had been steeped in some drug over the nostrils and mouths. Their eyes made Fairfax think of the eyes of frightened animals.

"Fear is lord," he thought, "the great master of men."

He had turned into a narrow lane leading south from Fleet Street, a mere cleft of blackness that was being

crushed between the leaning bulk of old, sombre houses, when he came suddenly upon a man lying at the bottom of a flight of steps. A stone house stood at the top of these steps, and this house looked shut up and deserted.

Fairfax stopped. The man's head was resting on the lowermost step, and in the dark his face was a patch of greyness. He was dressed in black, with white ruffles at his wrists, and from under his body projected the hilt of a walking-sword. He lay there so still that Fairfax thought him dead, though whether he had died suddenly of the plague or been run through in some quarrel, he could not tell.

The man opened his eyes.

"Hallo!" he said; "who's that?"

Fairfax bent over him.

"Are you hurt?"

The other made a weak gesture, warning him to stand back.

"If you love life, keep away. They threw me out of the house, ten minutes ago. It is a wonderful and tender world, sir!"

"Who threw you out?"

"My very good friends, including my sweet mistress. They had the grace to send my sword along with me. Hallo—are you there—my dear—digging into my ribs? Always love your sword, Mr. Stranger."

"You have the plague on you?" said Fairfax.

The man laughed. Both his voice and his laugh were feeble, but pleasantly frank and reckless, and even the selfish violence that had flung him out into the street to die had not made pulp of his audacity or his sense of humour. Fairfax was still bending over him. The man had the air of a foreigner, and one of those long, lean faces that the French associate with Gascony. His lingo, too, fluent though it was, betrayed little inflexions that were not English.

"You are a very shrewd person," he said. "Your logic is deadly. I advise you to keep away from my breath."

Fairfax reached for one of his hands, but the man tried to push him away.

"Keep off, you fool!"

Fairfax gripped the wrist and held it.

"You are cold. No, don't fight. It is generous of you, but I am not afraid."

"Look here," said the man in black, "what the deuce is it to you if you find a fellow lying in the gutter?"

"It may be a question of courage."

"Courage! You ride a queer sort of ass. Who are you? A parson, or a pup—or what?"

Fairfax had straightened himself and was looking up and down the darkening lane. He had almost forgotten the man as a man, but the affair had gripped him in a calm and impersonal way, provoking him to one of those cool and mad acts that seem motiveless to a stranger. He saw no one moving in the lane, and though there were lights in one or two windows, he knew that it would be useless to appeal for help.

The Frenchman was looking at him as though puzzled by his silence.

"Before you go," he said, "you might pull the sword from under me. I shall be more comfortable."

Fairfax looked down at him.

"What do you expect to happen to you?"

"Happen! Are you a man of no imagination? Why, I shall lie here, my friend. Do you think I am going to exert myself and crawl about for pity? I have never shown the white feather, and I will not show it now, or even this old sword of mine might get up and walk away. Consider; I have two chances. The searchers may find me and drag me off somewhere to die on a straw bed, or the death-cart will come along and clear up my carcass."

"There is yet another alternative," said Fairfax.

"Well, it is beyond my ken."

"It is probable that I shall take you to my lodging, and that you will get well."

The Frenchman was astonished, sceptical.

"You have been drinking."

"No."

"Then what the devil——"

"It is a question of courage. Fear is the great master

of men. I choose to stand and say : ' Fear, you are no master of mine ! ' "

" You should be in Bedlam ! But supposing I jibe at being made a meal of by your madness ? "

" I can carry you."

" I stand six feet, and weigh heavy."

" I have friends who will help me if the need arises."

The Frenchman made a struggle and sat up.

" Get away with you, you generous fool ! I shall lie softly here and wait for La Belle Dame sans Merci."

Fairfax had walked a few steps down the lane to look at something that he had seen standing in a dark entry. It was a clumsy truck or barrow that had been left at the mouth of an alley. He took hold of the handles and trundled it back to the flight of steps.

" You may as well tell me your name," he said. " Mine is John Fairfax."

The Frenchman crossed himself.

" There is a smell of hell in this ! My name is Marsac."

" What, the fencing-master ? "

" Yes, that devil."

Fairfax bent down, picked him up and laid him on the barrow.

" Are you ready ? "

" Name of a dog, but you are strong ! I give in, brother fool. But my sword—I want my sword."

" Here is your sword."

" Well, this beats the Bible ! Have you the money to pay for the ass ? "

Fairfax put his hands to the handles and barrowed Marsac down the lane.

CHAPTER XXX

WHEN Fairfax reached his own doorway Lantern Lane was almost in darkness. He unlocked the door, and putting an arm round Marsac, helped him into the house, and guiding his steps in the darkness, brought him into the room below his own. There was a bed in the room, a four-poster, heavily curtained, and when he had got Marsac on the bed, Fairfax pulled down the curtains and threw them out into the passage. He opened both lattices, and told Marsac to undress.

"Are you strong enough to do it? I am going to burn your clothes."

"One is always strong enough at a pinch," said the Frenchman.

Fairfax had seen the ashes of a fire glowing in the lane. The fire-tender had left it and gone home for the night, and taking a shovel from the outhouse beyond the kitchen, Fairfax brought in a pile of embers and soon set a fire burning in Marsac's room. Marsac had stripped himself, and thrown his clothes in a heap on the floor. Fairfax burnt them, lifting them on the fire with the shovel.

"Farewell, sweet taffeta!" said the Frenchman; "I loved that old suit. You had better put my sword in vinegar, Mr. Fairfax."

Fairfax was lighting a couple of candles.

"A merry heart goes all the way."

"A married one is stale-o. But why the devil you trouble to burn my clothes when you need never have meddled with my carcass——! Dear heart—but I am sweating!"

"It will do you good. Are you thirsty?"

"I could drink a little wine and water."

Fairfax brought an oak table and set it by the bed.

"I must go and look at the larder and the store chest. We may be shut up here for a month."

Marsac raised himself on one elbow, and his white face seemed to stand out like the head of a cameo with the darkness for a background. The candlelight showed his black, unshaven chin, the deep lines about his mouth and nostrils, his dark audacious eyes.

"What! You expect to be shut up here with me for a month?"

"We shall have the red cross on the door, and they may set a watch outside it."

"You are mad, quite mad," said the Frenchman. "What am I to you?"

Fairfax pushed a stool forward with his foot and sat down in front of the fire.

"Do you want me to reason it out? The inspiration is quite simple. I came up here from the country to prove to myself that I was not afraid. I have passed six weeks in this lane, helping the sick, and I think that I have got beyond fear. I have discovered a man far braver than myself, a man who does out of love what you and I would do out of pride. I have seen fear drive men and women to the most damnable treacheries, and I have learnt to hate fear as a thing more loathsome than this plague. When I found you lying in the street I think I was waiting for some such test of my courage. And your courage challenged me. I said, 'This man shall recover. We will join our two courages together and see what comes of it.' That's all."

Marsac lay back on the pillows.

"Yes, we shall see what comes of it," he said.

Fairfax heard someone passing in the lane, and he went to the street door and saw a man standing by the embers of the fire.

"Friend, do you know where Mr. Marbury lives?"

The man laughed.

"I should do, John, since I have just come from his house."

It was Marbury himself, and Fairfax went out and joined him by the fire. He told Marbury how he had found Marsac and had brought him to his lodging, and how he expected to be shut up with him for a month.

"The man thinks I am mad," he confessed.

"And so you are, John, with that right sort of madness which brings God very close to us. I shall lose your help for a month, which grieves me, but there it is."

"We shall need food sent us."

"I will arrange that for you. Widow Banham serves the other houses here night and morning, as you know. I can pass Stott the surgeon's house on the way home, and I will send him to you."

It was a beautiful night, with the stars very bright in the sky, and the river flowing silently past the tall houses. Marbury looked up at the stars. The night seemed to have some message for him.

"I have a feeling that the worst is over," he said; "let us be of good cheer."

Fairfax was thinking of Luce, and how he could explain the silence of the coming month, for now that death was so near to him he felt it unsafe to send her a letter written by his own hand. He spoke of it to Marbury, and Marbury took out his tablets, and kneeling down beside the fire, found that the embers gave light enough for him to write.

"There is a victualling wagon coming up to-morrow out of West Surrey. If I give the carter a letter and fee him, he may be able to find a man to deliver it. To whom do I write?"

"My Lady Luce Paradell of Fernhurst. Fernhurst lies some miles north-west of Dorking."

Marbury noted it on his tablets.

"What shall I say?"

"Write that I am well and of a good heart, but that I do not think it safe to send a letter from my own hand, because I have a friend with me who is sick of the plague. Tell her to burn the letter, and to think of me as her devoted servant."

"It shall be written to-night. I will go and send Stott to you. And God be with you, John."

He put his tablets away, shook Fairfax by the hand, and walked off up the lane.

So on that starry September night Fairfax entered upon that extraordinary month of self-imprisonment in the house at the end of Lantern Lane. Mr. Stott, the surgeon, knocked at the door about ten o'clock, and

found John carrying coals up from the cellar. Stott was a young man who had studied at Paris, Montpellier, Padua and in Holland, one of the new school of observers and thinkers, a little self-opinionated, but sharp as a walking-sword. He had remained at his post all through the plague, and had gained a very considerable experience of it. Fairfax noticed that he wore a coat and breeches of coarse linen, and silk gloves. His head was shaved, and when he bent down to examine Marsac, John, who was holding a candle, saw his scalp shining like a bladder of lard.

Stott soon made his diagnosis. Marsac had the plague, but it appeared to Stott that it was one of those milder cases in which recovery was possible. He called John out into the entry.

"There is a bubo in the left groin, and another in the left axilla. He seems strong and hardy, and there is no great fever."

He stepped to the door and spat into the lane.

"Are you playing nurse?"

"Yes."

"Keep a fire burning, don't touch him if you can help it; scald his drinking mug and plate. And wear gloves."

"Like yours?"

"Silk. I boil them every day, and use a clean pair whenever I can."

"What am I to feed him on?" John asked.

"Bread and milk, broth. Make him take it. I will send you a bolus and a cooling draught."

He made strange noises in his throat and spat a second time, and taking out a silver box, popped a little ball of saltpetre into his mouth. Fairfax liked the man. He was so cool and practical, and unsententious.

"I suppose courage counts?" he asked him.

"Always. It is the spring of the watch."

Life, concentrated within the four walls of that house, became like a reflection in a mirror, vivid, and very brilliant as to its colours. Fairfax looked at the world with the eyes of the flesh and of the spirit. He saw a lattice all mellow with the dawn, or blue with night, the gentle azure of the September sky, the river unrolling itself like a great bale of silk, the sprouting of young grass between the stones

of the lane. At night—the stars, and the wet murmur of the river! A tolling of bells; the smell of the mud drying in the sunshine at low tide, or the perfume of some powder that Stott had given him to burn in the fire. He caught glimpses of Marsac's face, glimpses that surprised him like the nakedness of a girl caught bathing in a river. The man's thoughts and emotions seemed in his eyes and skin. For the first two days he glowed with a laughing recklessness; his face was flushed, patched with red. Then he grew feeble, helpless as a child, lying very still, and watching Fairfax with questioning eyes. Fairfax thought that it was death, but when Stott came, he—who had seen hundreds die—beheld life resting after climbing out of the abyss. This passivity, this feebleness made Fairfax think of a little flame that grows taller and stronger as the oil climbs the wick. Marsac's eyes ceased to look puzzled and dim. Sometimes Fairfax would see in them a glimmer of light like the light in the eyes of a lover. The Frenchman's gaunt face had become spiritualized, as though it had been passed through a furnace and had come forth glowing and white—with all its metal cleansed and refined.

Fairfax did not spare himself. He spaced out his day with an almost monastic preciseness, and worked like a lay brother. He rose at six, washed himself from head to foot, and then sat at his window for an hour writing in his journal. The cellar was well stocked with coal, there was plenty of faggot-wood in the yard, and he kept two fires burning, one in Marsac's room, the other in the kitchen. At eight a woman left a jug of milk and the day's food at the street door. At half-past eight Fairfax took Marsac his breakfast, after eating his own in the kitchen, for he had been warned not to go fasting into a room where the plague had been. Then he turned to like a house-wench, put on an old pair of slops and scrubbed the floors and the stairs. He did this each day, partly for exercise, partly for cleanliness. Marbury would come in and find John on all fours with scrubbing-brush and pail, like a seaman scrubbing a deck. Then there was the cooking to be done, and John cooked with prayer and humility and a patience that refused to be dismayed. Sometimes he burnt the meat, but at the frying of bacon he became an expert. Part

of the afternoon he passed in reading books which Marbury brought him, or in sitting at Marsac's window talking to the Frenchman. The hour before dusk he made sacred to Luce. He was writing a quaint day-book that should pass into her hands if fate willed it that he should sicken and die of the plague. In it he recorded all his thoughts and actions with the tender egotism of a lover. She was very real to him was Luce during those days of his self-imprisonment. He seemed to see her always among the beeches of Lost Lady's Wood, a figure of mystery and of dark-eyed aloofness, still mourning for her father.

Once or twice he had letters from her, letters which always disappointed him a little. They seemed cold, consciously restrained, ending with some affectionate and "sisterly message" that suggested an afterthought, even a sigh of relief that the letter was finished. John would read them through and through, trying to persuade himself that this word or that carried some more intimate meaning. He was always searching for a lost perfume, something that was not there.

But if woman's love had not come his way, he had won the love of a man. It is a very rare and a very strange thing—this great love of one man for another, a love that is almost like the love of a woman. Marsac knew now that he was to live, and that it was Fairfax who had given him life. It was not his gratitude that was challenged, but the whole reckless and adventurous heart of him. The simplicity of this other man touched him, almost to tears. He could have laughed to see John scrubbing the floor, or warming up a posset on the fire, had not his laughter lost itself in something far more deep and generous. He had his face and hands washed by John. It was John who put clean sheets on the bed, after airing them before the fire.

"Jack, if you were a wench I should ask you to marry me."

Mr. Marbury had brought Fairfax a couple of clay pipes and a roll of tobacco. John sat by Marsac's window christening one of the pipes. The smell of the tobacco reached Marsac's nostrils and made him realize how good life can be.

" Fill that other pipe for me, Jack."

" It won't do you any good."

" Six puffs and no more. Oh, man, I feel the spring in my blood."

Fairfax smiled at him, and fetching the other clay from the mantelshelf, twisted a little plug of tobacco into it, and, lighting a splinter at the fire, put the pipe in Marsac's mouth. The Frenchman's thin lips sucked at the stem, while Fairfax held the burning splinter to the tobacco.

" It is good, Jack ! My God, 'it is good ! "

He puffed smoke, and when Fairfax would have taken the pipe away, he cried out like a child for the bottle.

" Just a little more, Jack."

" That's enough for the first time."

" Ten more puffs."

So intent were they over the business that they did not notice Marbury standing in the doorway, silently laughing at these two grown men. They were as solemn as Indians, and he loved them both.

" Here's a nice Christian ceremony—— ! "

He came forward into the room smiling, a letter in his hand. Marbury went everywhere. People believed that God had given him some miraculous garment of safety.

" A letter for you, John. It came by the wagon."

Fairfax took it, looked at the handwriting on the cover, and slipped out of the room. They heard him go upstairs and close the door.

Marbury sat down beside Marsac's bed.

" Well, it seems that you will soon be up again and teaching men to kill each other."

" No, that is not the true way of putting it, mon père. I teach men to defend themselves. I have never loved a bully."

They heard John walking up and down in the room above.

" Listen," said Marsac, sitting up and smiling. " What sort of letter have you brought him ? "

" A happy letter, I hope."

" From a woman ! "

" I think so."

" Mon père, I could cut the woman's throat ! "

" What—jealous ? "

Marsac's face was like the face of one inspired.

" Mon père, I love that man. I would give him my life if it would do him good. A wench would eat the heart of a man like that, and never give him a thank you. I have seen Paris, Rome, Madrid, London and all that they can show you. Women, I have had them by the score ! Women came easily to a man like me. I have had to brush them off like flies. And why ? Because I carry a little swagger, and have a wicked eye and a lean, devil-may-care look that makes the wenches mad to have me. What if I shock you, mon père ! But that man is worth twenty of me, and I love him."

Mr. Marbury nodded his ugly head.

" But there are good women, my friend."

" I knew one—and she died ! I have not met three women in Europe whom I could not have played the devil with. . . . French, Spanish, English, all the same."

" It depends upon where you look for the women," said the parson. " I will not have you lie there and tell me that my mother——"

Marsac spread his arms.

" A hit ! Yes, a man speaks of what he knows, and his knowledge may damn him. But I would like to choose John Fairfax's wife."

" Would she be ugly ? " asked Mr. Marbury, with a droll sparkle of the eyes.

In the room above John Fairfax was standing by the window overlooking the river, with Luce's letter in his hands. The sun shone into the room and upon the letter, and the light seemed reflected to Fairfax's face.

" How very brave of you, John."

That was what he read, and that is why the sunlight seemed in his eyes. Marbury had been telling tales, painting a romantic picture, but Fairfax forgave him.

CHAPTER XXXI

THAT letter of Mr. Marbury's had changed Luce's attitude towards John.

For the moment she had been conscious of nothing but a little cry of impulsive admiration, of a pride in him that was pleasant, and coloured with a quick flash of virginal vanity. It was she who had given Fairfax the "flag," and he had carried it through the breach and outfaced death upon the ramparts. "How very brave of you, John." That was her first frank and triumphant cry.

But in a little while she was realizing his danger, and remembering that it was she who had inspired him to face it. His thoroughness made her stand at gaze, gave her a little sense of breathlessness. This adventure of his was so quiet, so real; it boasted no trappings, no cock of the hat or flash of the sword. He had gone calmly and straight to the place of peril, like a great captain who is ready to share with his men the dirt, the ugliness, the starvation of some battered redoubt, while more flamboyant gentlemen show their plumes and harness in the citadel. The simplicity and the sincerity of his courage touched her. She felt that she had been given a revelation of the real man in Fairfax. Her pride—the pride of the young beauty who looks down with calm eyes from a high tower—became tempered with an emotion that was very near to tenderness.

If John should die?

She found that she was greatly moved by the thought of John dying. She did not love him; she felt quite sure of that, but somehow he had put his hand into her life and it held a significant comradeship. She had never forgotten her father's deathbed, and Fairfax's insight and

generosity. She was glad that he was her guardian; she trusted John.

Her thoughts and her emotions crystallized upon that point—his guardianship. Had John considered it sufficiently; was he not being a little too thorough in his courage? "I want him to remember me," said the woman in her. She did not put it so crudely as to say: "I should come first," but the shadow of the thought was there. The figure of this man had arrested her attention. The subtle interplay had begun.

Fernhurst was still full of the September sunshine, gaiety and gossip. Luce heard that Bellasis had lost a leg in the great sea fight with the Dutch, and that he had become Marquis of Amersham. His affairs interested her not at all. My lady was being courted by Sir Miles Grimstone of Grimstone, and Luce realized that her mother might marry again, though she had a suspicion that Catharine Paradell preferred the excitements of her liberty. Luce was much alone. A flaxen-headed and pretentious booby—Marmaduke Mitton—had tried to persuade her to interest herself in him, but she disliked his tow head and his conceited bearing. Her mother had become knowing, and mysteriously sweet and suggestive.

"My dear, when this silly plague is over we will go to London. Do not tell me that you do not know that you will be one of the beauties."

Luce showed no animation, and yet she had to confess to herself that the great world called to her. She wanted to match herself with the men and women of the day, try her wings, feel all the excitement of the chase. She was conscious of power, and she still had many illusions. Life is a tempting feast to youth and it is right that it should be tasted.

"I suppose you will want me to marry," she said with calm candour.

"You shall marry whom you please," said the honeypot, "provided, of course, you can please that Puritan."

It was her plan to make Luce regret John's guardianship, and to end by making him appear the ogre.

But at the end of a divine September day Luce sat down and wrote to her guardian. The bowls on her

writing-table were full of flowers, and she could see the evening sunlight spinning a web of gold over the oaks and beeches.

"I wish you to remember me, John," she wrote, "and the choice you hold over my life. I think the last news of you made me a little afraid, and a little jealous of your courage. I look to you as my one sure friend."

Fairfax was happy. He had caught the more intimate note in Luce's letters, and he was finding in Marsac a man with whom it was easy to live. The adventurous vagabondage of the Frenchman's life had made him as quick in the spirit as he was in the sword-arm. He had gone through life fighting and laughing and making love, and rogue that he was, he had his own quick code of honour and the temper of a gentleman. There were certain things that he would not do, certain meannesses that made him flame. His great love was for his sword. It was his sweetheart, his lady. He cherished its honour and its pride far more jealously than most men cherish the honour of their wives, and he boasted that, unlike a woman, it had never betrayed him.

He was up now, and able to sit at the open window in the black coat and breeches that Fairfax had bought for him through one of Mr. Marbury's parishioners. He insisted on making his own bed and sweeping his room. John's madness no longer surprised him. He understood it and its significance. Fairfax's courage was his sword. He had set out to test its temper just as he—Marsac—had thrown himself into some mad and desperate escapade to prove how contemptible a thing death was when faced resolutely in some dark alley. During the days of that long September these two men had come to know each other. They had talked nakedly, with quiet serenity, as men talk sometimes in the night before a battle. Marsac believed in nothing but himself.

"Keep your head cool, your wrist supple, and your sword sharp."

Such was his philosophy.

"Neither God nor the devil can save you from a Spaniard with a four-foot rapier who has caught you making love to his mistress."

"No gallant will respect your wife unless he respects your sword."

"A pleasant tongue and easy manners will get you a seat in a tavern, but they will not prevent a bully from snatching your drink."

"Laws were made by the men who have no stomach for fighting. When laws fail you, as in war and in love, nations and men go out naked into the wilderness."

"Some men are as sheep, but there will always be wolves and sheep-dogs."

But the main thought in Marsac's head was his debt of honour to John. It was part of his code to repay an obligation or to wipe out an affront.

"If a man has ever lent me his life, I have lent him mine in return."

He was fiercely generous in his comradeships. To repay, honourably, even recklessly, was a sort of passion with him. He was the man of adventure, of a quick flash of the eye, audacious yet cool, warm-hearted, impulsive in the conception, grim in the carrying out. Some wit in Paris had once nicknamed him "Lightning in Winter." It was this cool swiftness that made him so deadly with the sword.

On the last evening in September they had climbed up on to the leads of the house and were sitting there with their backs against the tiles, and the grey river dappled with gold below them. Pigeons wheeled above the chimney-stacks. The sky was very blue above the spires of the churches. There were a few boats upon the river; some nobleman's galley going past with the scarlet blades of its oars smiting the water; along the Surrey shore crawled two barges loaded with victuals brought down from the country.

"How am I to pay this debt?" said the Frenchman, staring straight out over the river.

"I am aware of no debt."

"It is your privilege to forget, mine to remember. Consider, my friend, how I stand, or rather, sit, at this moment. A naked man with nothing but his sword and such money as he has banked locked up in the coffers of a Lombard Street worthy who died of the plague. You

have fed me, housed me, clothed me, washed my face and shaved my chin. Is that to be forgiven ? ”

“ We have done everything but quarrel,” said Fairfax, smiling, “ and I should stand no chance with you at that.”

Marsac sat up, snapping his fingers.

“ By God, Jack, nor would you ! I have heard you say that you are a fool with the sword.”

“ I am.”

“ Man, I’ll teach you to fence. Why, I have charged these Whitehall gallants a guinea a lesson ! What say you ? ”

He glanced at Fairfax, and John’s face puzzled him. He was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, lips compressed, his forehead a-frown with some knot of thought.

“ It had never occurred to me,” he said.

“ What—man—what ? ”

“ That I may need it. A man should be armed against all hazards. That’s true.”

“ Or eat dirt, Jack, or see some brisk, courtly devil filch the woman he loves.”

Fairfax still looked at the river.

“ Could you make me a swordsman ? I tell you I fence like a country squire, though I have had lessons in your French style.”

“ You have the build for it. Show me your wrist.”

Fairfax pulled up the sleeve of his coat.

“ It is the eyes, the wrist and the feet,” said the Frenchman, feeling John’s forearm, and looking at his tendons ; “ some men are always slow and clumsy. There is something in your good swordsman. You can teach a man to hold his own in any ordinary quarrel, but to teach him to match himself with a master of fence is another matter.”

“ Till you have put the horse at the jump ? ”

“ Exactly.”

“ And how long ? ”

Marsac laughed, showing his teeth.

“ How long ? You ask me that ! Why, a man goes on learning all his life. Say six months, if you shape well. You may have that flick of the devil in you for all I know, the snap and swiftness that cannot be taught,

and must be in the man. Even then, your man who can play well does not always fight well. I should say that you are a better fighter than player, and one never quite knows how well a man is going to fight."

He was so eager to take Fairfax in hand and to give something in return for all that he had received that even if John had had no desire to become a swordsman he would not have had the heart to dash Marsac's enthusiasm. And so it was agreed between them that Marsac should be John's master.

"I'll teach thee everything, Jack; things that I have taught no other man. A master must always keep something back, but you and I shall have no secrets. I had two pretty blades with buttons at my late lodging. Give me a paper and pen, and I will write that jade such a letter that she will vomit those two swords."

They went below to Fairfax's room, and Marsac wrote his letter. It was of such ferocity, and smelt so strong of brimstone, that the man whom they bargained with out of the window, and who accepted a crown for carrying the letter, came back with the two swords.

The flicker of the steel was in Marsac's eyes. He laughed; passed a blade between his fingers, struck an attitude, and broke into the old Italian fencing lingo that had such a swaggering and adventurous bluster for him.

"The Passado, Jack, the Botta Lunga, the Caricado. Here is the 'Rinverso tondo' of Tappa the Milanese. Here is a botta secrete, a falso manco, le coup de Jarnac. Look you now, 'la botte de Nevers.' God, how the old words make my blood go! But this is all the ancient stuff, my lad, of the four-foot spit and dagger days. The small sword, the French lightning, that is game I shall teach thee. Damn, but I feel all swimming in the head!"

And so he was. His colour had gone, and he was as white as his shirt. Fairfax made him sit down on the bed.

"You are too weak yet."

"I'm all of a tremble, like a boy when his ladylove drops him the first sidelong look. But we will begin to-morrow in the yard. There is not enough head-space in these rooms. But I can teach you in here how to stand and to move your feet."

"We will see," said John, "how you are to-morrow."

"It will do me good, man. My muscles are like wax."

A certain small boy of adventurous habits, having escalated a pile of old tubs and timber lying against the wall of his father's yard, and hearing strange noises in the world below, peeped through a wooden lattice that was smothered with ivy and saw two men thrusting at each other with swords. The child was frightened, and scrambling down the pile of lumber, ran into the house to his mother.

"I've seen two men fighting in Mrs. Jordan's yard."

"Well, let them fight. Never burn your fingers, Harry, pulling other people's chestnuts out of the fire. But it's the fencing-master—that Frenchman—giving a lesson. I don't hold with swords, though; a prentice's bat is good enough for me."

The boy went back to the ivy-covered lattice and watched the two men fencing in the yard. The sword-play fascinated him. He discovered that these friendly fights took place daily, and he would wait for the clink of steel, climb the lumber-pile, and lie with his face close to the lattice, quiet as a cat. He began to conceive an immense admiration for the tall, lean man whose eyes danced and who was always smiling, and whose sword went to and fro like a bit of light. The boy did not think much of Fairfax. He looked so solemn, and the Frenchman could hit him so easily. He had not Marsac's romantic, leopard-like splendour of movement, or the audacious, laughing eyes.

Sometimes the Frenchman would scold Fairfax, and the boy would snigger to himself.

"Not so stiff, Jack, not so stiff. Lighter on your feet, man."

Never did a boy receive so sound a grounding in the play of the small-sword of the French school of Louis Quatorze. He picked up the lingo, and would attack his mother's girl with a small cane, shouting: "Carte—tierce—flanquonade. A hit, a hit!" He was a little puzzled to know why these gentlemen used always the point, and never slashed and hacked in the good old swashbuckling, back-sword manner. It was all so neat and quiet and precise.

But he began to understand that it was also very deadly. He would see the button of Marsac's sword strike Fairfax

in the ribs, and know that but for the button "old swarthy face" would have been a dead man. He listened to Marsac's aphorisms, his little bursts of affectionate scolding.

"No sweat, Jack, no flurry! Is it not a gentleman's weapon, so stately, so cool, so ironical? If you would only be less stiff, man. You want a pint of Spanish wine inside you."

The boy watched them all through October, and he began to realize that "old swarthy face" was becoming much more brisk and dexterous. There was that afternoon when Fairfax scored a hard and palpable hit, and Marsac flung up his arms and shouted with fierce delight:

"You have it! By God—there is hope for you, Jack. That was fiercely given."

At the end of October the boy discovered that Marsac had a secret. He had been teaching Fairfax to fence with the arm extended, and with most of the weight of the body on the right foot, but suddenly he changed his method. The boy heard him lecture John, and demonstrate to him another style which he called the "*Manière de Marsac*." He taught John to stand closer in, with the forearm bent, and the point of the sword cocked upwards. There was a slight crouch in the attitude of the body. There were swift turns of the wrist and forearm, deadly upward jabs quick as lightning. It was like a man who fights with his fists at close quarters, arms half bent, and swinging in short, upward blows at the belly, ribs and throat. It needed coolness, ferocity, an immense and confident precision in attack, but even the boy could see its deadliness.

Fairfax appeared to pick up the new manner with no little readiness. By the middle of November he was quite familiar with it.

"There are only three men living who know that style," said the Frenchman; "in three months, Jack, I would trust you to fight a bully."

CHAPTER XXXII

ON one misty November morning John took horse for Shere, riding by way of Epsom over the downs, whose grey sides seemed to smoke as the sun broke through. The plague had done its worst. People were coming back, and those who had stood to their posts while the danger was hot and terrible felt free to go where they would, carrying an unsoiled pride. Old Pagan had gone in his coach to Tonbridge, and had lent John his favourite saddle-horse, and Fairfax put him at a canter over the downs. Both man and beast were gay. The wet splendour of the autumn woods shone through the lifting fog.

Fairfax supped in his own house that night, and sat before his own fire. He had made Garret send him out clean clothes from his wardrobe, and had changed into them in the barn, with the two dogs barking and playing round him, and Garret telling him all the gossip. Mrs. Lavender had been brought to bed with twins. The parson's daughter had married Lord Rockingham's steward. It was said that my Lady Paradell might take a second husband—and God pity the poor man! There had been no case of plague in the parish, though a few wretches had been found living in the woods, and had been driven away by the constable. No Christian act! Well, sir, Sir Peter Temperley had ordered it, as a magistrate; the wretches were nothing less than vagabonds, and a man had to think of his own children. Yes, the crops had been heavy, in spite of the drought. And would Mr. John like a sack-posset?

Fairfax lay awake till midnight, thinking of Luce, and of the welcome that he might find in her eyes. He had not warned her of his coming, nor did she know that he was at Shere. It was his wish to take her by surprise, and to hope for the impulsive Luce of two years ago, and yet

when he topped the downs next morning he felt almost a coward in the face of the adventure he had set himself. He knew that he had proved his courage, that he was a better man for having known such men as Marbury and Prosper Marsac. He had a new grip on life, he was harder, far less sentimental, and yet the nearness of this slip of a girl made him strangely afraid. It is possible that he had absorbed some of Marsac's scepticism. "Beat a woman, and she will love you." But to put on another man's philosophy is like putting on strange clothes. John felt uncomfortable in Marsac's clothes, and could not decide how to wear them.

The lover in him wanted to love, and not to play a game of worldly hide-and-seek, and the wild woods called to the lover in him. They flamed, licking the pale-blue sky with their tops of yellow and bronze. The smell of them was wet and fragrant, tinged with a strange tenderness. They were so still, so mysterious, dropping their yellow leaves in the November sunlight, autumn tears and little whispering sighs. The man on the horse rode through them with a feeling of suspense.

It was more than a whim that made him turn aside towards Lost Lady's Wood and the glory of the beeches. The young trunks upheld a cloud of many colours, a cloud that was opalescent in the shimmer of mist, glowing with crimsons and greens, gold, amber and bronze. The blue sky framed it like a great mosaic. Rabbits scurried away over the wet grass. The bushes were hung with gossamer. In the shadows John saw leaves falling, dim, like little flashes of pale sunlight, silent, strangely sad.

He tethered his horse at the park gate, walked into the glade and found Luce there, leaning against a tree and looking up at the mass of autumn leaves with the eyes of a dreamer. She was in black, and seemed to be taller, more mysterious, and beautiful beyond his memory of her. He had come quite close before she became aware of him, and when she turned her head he felt afraid.

"You, John!"

For a moment her eyes lit up, dark eyes quivering with inward light. He found himself thinking how beautiful they were, and wondering at their texture of dusky shadows

and threads of gold. He felt that he could have loved her for those eyes alone, and the liquid, shadowy and sensitive soul in them.

"I rode down yesterday."

She held out a hand.

"Why did you not tell me?"

She was looking at him, and it seemed that she suddenly guessed the significance of his silence. Her face appeared to close up like a flower. Her eyes lost all their silky light. She drew her hand away almost before he had touched it.

"I thought I would surprise you."

He was hurt and rather helpless with the abrupt pain of it. She was as conscious of his pain as he was of the clouding of her consciousness. She understood him perfectly; he understood her not at all.

"So you have come here?"

"For three days."

She appeared to rouse herself, to make a conscious effort, and the result was an easy yet conventional frankness that held him off like a wall of bright, cold ice. She turned to walk towards the park, taking his bewilderment along with her, and feeling both angry and exultant because he could be hurt so easily.

Fairfax was thinking—"Why did she change so suddenly?—I could have sworn that she was glad when first she saw me.—And now—this chatter——!"

"So the plague is on the wane, John, which means that we shall be in London before the winter is out."

He gave her a quick, passing look.

"At the house in King Street?"

"Yes. Mother is so bored here."

"And you?"

"I am quite ready to go to London," she said, angry with him for his solemn face.

Fairfax was unfastening his horse at the gate, and he was slow over it, so slow that she guessed that he was half minded to mount and ride back to Shere. The Fairfax of six months ago might have been guilty of such romantic sulking, and as Luce watched him she seemed to feel that she would hate John if he let himself be beaten. She

was in the midst of those wayward moments when a young girl's emotions drift like feathers on a pond. The deeps of her own self were obscure and baffling. This lover of hers worried her, because his love was asking for an answer, and waiting with a solemn awe that was exasperating. Luce was one of those who would not love until the one man made love to her fiercely. "My beloved, I could die in silence for you," were not words that troubled her. "I want you—and I will have you—and I will fight till I get you." She trusted John. But why was he so distressingly noble and patient when she was so full of her passionate and virginal indecisions? Was it not a man's business to overcome these indecisions?

"I suppose I may dine with you?"

She found him smiling at her and opening the gate, for in those few moments something of Marsac's debonair hardihood had come to Fairfax. Mere passive, cautious courage does not win battles. "Women are born fencers," said the prophet; "never flinch from them, and never forget to smile."

"Since when have you needed asking?"

She became suddenly gay, and into the ice of this gaiety John looked as into a mirror. He made himself feel unafraid of her, and he gave her words that were laughing, ironical blows.

"So you will be presented at Court?"

"Of course," she said calmly; "I wish to be seen."

"Vanity is very charming."

"Am I vain?"

"A woman to display her beauty, a man—his strength. There is a pretty, sententious phrase! You will make conquests, and you will tread on the necks of the conquered."

She gave him a sidelong look.

"Why are you remaining in London?"

"Because I love it."

"You, the country lover!"

"The bumpkin! Why, London puts an edge upon you. It is wicked and ugly, and beautiful and heroic. It is like living twenty lives at once, and, Luce, I like a pretty woman finely dressed."

Her eyes gave him a wide, smiling stare.

"Oh, you do! Well—it is very sensible of you. I do abominate people who pretend, who are all dressed up in manners. Are there not any honest rogues?"

"Scores," he said, laughing; "I am a scholar, studying them. I live in a lane over the river, and in two minutes I am in Whitefriars. I have the pass into a rogue-shop, and a parson gave it to me."

He began to tell her about Mr. Marbury and Prosper Marsac, forgetting those sentimental and boyish dreams of the morning, how he had half-expected her to say: "Oh, how brave you have been, John, how wonderfully brave!" Instead of telling her about the plague and showing a high romantic swagger, he was making her laugh and touching her heart with his tales of the little, ugly, devoted parson. He spoke of Marbury with human tenderness, and his picture of Marsac was equally human. He had touched Luce without even planning to touch her, because he had discovered himself to her in speaking of these men.

They crossed the park and saw the windows of Fernhurst House all a-glimmer in the sunlight, and its yews and cedars dark against the autumn woods and the blue of the sky. By the sunk fence a labourer was clearing the leaves out of the stone conduit that led to the pool, and Fairfax handed his horse to the man. They entered the garden by the little swinging gate at the bottom of the rose-walk, Fairfax holding it open for Luce to pass through.

"I foresee that many gentlemen will be very eager to call me friend."

He was smiling down at her with a laughing tenderness that concealed all the seriousness of his love. She paused, looking up at him, and noticing the little smiling wrinkles at the corner of his eyes, his firm, kind mouth, and frank forehead. She knew that she liked John very well, and that she trusted him, but there was a subtle something that was lacking. She thought that he interested her, a fine man in the making, and yet he did not trouble her heart as a girl expects it to be troubled. She did not feel herself trembling on the edge of the divine madness, waiting to run out into the moonlight with him and give herself to his arms and his kisses.

"I shall always call you friend," she said.

His face was sad for a moment. "And nothing else?" he seemed to be saying.

They walked on.

"I shall be very hard to please."

"Will you, John?"

"I shall not think any man fit to marry you. I am serious, Luce; I shall need much convincing."

"And supposing——?"

"Well, in that case I shall have to surrender."

"You did not wait to hear what I had to say. Supposing I remain heart-whole?"

His eyes were sad as he smiled at her.

"I cannot imagine some man being so uninspired as to fail to touch you."

"Thank you," she said, laughing, "you have more faith in men than I have. You will have to hold a levée, John, and receive the suppliants."

"I shall try to do my duty."

She felt vaguely incensed by his use of the word "duty." He seemed such a sobersides, so calm, so restrained. She was ready to swear that John Fairfax would never set her heart on fire. He was no fighter. She had dreams of a man who would carry her off at the gallop, a man whom she feared a little and whom she trusted utterly, a man to whom it would be an ecstasy to surrender. And John Fairfax was not that man.

My Lady saw them climbing the steps of the terrace. She was sitting at a table in the great bay window, painting flowers on a silk fan, for fans had come once more into Catharine Paradell's life. She had at least a dozen of them in her new oak cupboard, fans with ivory sticks and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, fans of silk and of feathers, lacquered fans, fans of gold and silver tissue. They belonged to the same little hectic world as her colour-balls, pencils, perfume-pots, and powder-boxes. If Luce's mother painted her face as well as her fans she did it delicately and with discretion. At eight-and-thirty a woman is still capable of many conquests.

She opened the lattice and waved her hand to John. He had not seen her since she had spoken those savage words to him in the gallery on the day before her husband's

death, and Fairfax seemed to behold a new woman. She had flowered a second time, and with all the extravagance of art. Her dress was a warm redness, edged with sable. Those sidelong brown eyes of hers were arch and wanton. She had a string of pearls in her hair, and as she smiled on him Fairfax remembered that her lips had always been pale. They were red now, almost as red as blood.

"Man, how dare you bring us the plague? I can assure you that I am an arrant coward."

Her gaiety was not assumed. She was gay, most absurdly gay, and far younger than Luce. Fairfax felt nonplussed.

"I think the danger is past," he said.

"None the less, keep away," she laughed, spreading her fan with its red and blue birds all a-flutter; "we are not all so heroic as you, sir."

Luce was watching her mother as a shrewd child watches a silly and amorous aunt. She had seen the birth of Catharine Paradell's second youth, all this coquetting and fan-fluttering, this rouging, and pencilling of eyelashes. It had made her think of an ivory figure turning to wax and burning like a candle. But all the same this second woman was more pleasant to live with.

She looked at John. His austere and surprised face piqued her. He was quite unable to adapt himself to my Lady's new amiability.

"You are looking very well, madam," he said.

"La, a compliment from you!"

She closed her fan and rapped his knuckles with it, and to Luce both of them looked vaguely ridiculous.

Dinner did not ease Fairfax's sense of embarrassment. This woman, whom he had always hated, seemed anxious to please him, and her pleasantry kept him searching for her motives. She made him tell her about the plague, how London had suffered, and how London had behaved itself. She seemed to snap eagerly at any horror, and to relish the most fantastic, physical details. Fairfax was attacked by the grotesque thought that that red mouth of hers had sucked blood.

"You must have witnessed many wild scenes. And the debaucheries we heard of! Is it true that women received gallants in the churches?"

She was always edging towards the provocations of sex. She made Fairfax tell of his life in Lantern Lane, and smiled incredulously when he said that he had made his own bed and cooked his own food.

"A lonely bachelor! My dear man, not a wench in the house! Oh, fie!"

But she had made a mental note of the place of John's lodgings, for her silliness was the mere cover of her day-book.

"Think of that, Luce. A gentleman washing his own shirt!"

She laughed, and almost ogled John, but Luce did not laugh. She was vaguely silent.

When Fairfax took his leave of them she pressed him to come again, and spoke of coaching to Shere by way of Dorking. John warned her as to the state of the roads, and my Lady made a jest of it.

"Listen to that! He does not want us at Shere, Luce. Oh, these men, and their secrets!"

To silence her he promised to ride over again before returning to London, glancing at Luce as he made the promise, and winning nothing from her but a consenting smile.

When he had gone my Lady took to praising him immoderately. She had returned to the painting of her fan, while Luce sat by the fire.

"Why, the man has improved out of all knowledge. He has come by good manners. Petticoats, my dear, petticoats."

Luce turned her head, and watched her mother's right hand dabbling with the paints.

"He is happier, I think," she said, and turned again to the fire.

"Happier! Why, the man has a roguish eye. London has taught him to take his pleasures."

"Mother," said Luce's voice with sudden fierceness, "what do you mean?"

My lady laughed heartily.

"Mean! My dear child, no man is bearable until he has had affairs. Do you think John went to London to defy the plague? La, you dear innocent, of course not.

Why, I knew at once that things had happened to John ; you see it in a man's eyes. All that talk about the little parson and the fencing-master——"

Luce got up and walked to the door.

"I do not believe it," she said. "John is not like that."

Her mother shrugged.

"Romantic child ! I think I shall paint a rose under each of these birds. What do you say ?"

But Luce, looking white and silent, had gone out and closed the door.

CHAPTER XXXIII

PROSPER MARSAC had recovered his money from Lombard Street and taken to himself a new lodging and new clothes, and when Fairfax returned from Shere he found Marsac settled in two fair rooms in Gold Hammer Court, dressed in a suit of black satin, and with a flagon of Burgundy on the table. A Flemish red camlet cloak hung on the back of the chair. He had silver buckles on his red-heeled shoes, and lace at his wrists.

Marsac embraced him.

"Here am I, washed and clothed and in my right mind. The house is clean, and the woman too old and ugly to be troublesome. She has a set of rooms free on the next floor. Join me."

He was looking at John's eyes, and he saw that they were sad, even when he smiled.

"I am back at my old lodging, Prosper."

"What, all alone?"

"No; the woman has returned, and is very loth to lose me. She is poor. And somehow I have an affection for the place, having passed through so much there."

Marsac poured him out some wine.

"I had hoped to have you here. There is an old hall opening off the court where I can give lessons. I am wondering how much you have forgotten in a week."

Fairfax had walked to the window and was looking down into the court, where a porter in a red coat was pinching the cheek of a laughing washerwoman.

"I would that some things could be forgotten," he said.

And then he laughed. The girl had boxed the man's ears.

"So should a man box the ears of his fate. Can you give me an hour a day?"

"Two, and my first and freshest. I have very great

hopes of you, Jack. If I could give you a little more devil——”

Fairfax turned from the window, picked up his glass and drank, and in the doing of it there was a freedom of action, a touch of recklessness that Marsac understood.

“The jade has flouted him,” he thought. “God bless her! This man was not made to be lost in a pair of baby’s eyes.”

“Well, to-morrow?” he said aloud.

“To-morrow.”

Fairfax raised his eyes to Marsac’s, and in them there was a smoulder of fire.

“The thought has come to me that some day I may have to fight in earnest.”

“Your play needed spicing, Jack; I am glad of it.”

So Fairfax remained at the house of Mrs. Jordan in Lantern Lane, in the room with the window overlooking the river. He sat often at this window, reading, or writing in his journal, and all that he wrote seemed to reflect the greyness and the melancholy of the river. That second day at Fernhurst had left him with no illusions. Luce had been disastrously silent. She had avoided his eyes, given him casual monosyllables, and left him most of the day with her mother.

Fairfax’s journal betrayed touches of irony in those December confessions.

“I am driven to admit that I do not understand women. It may be that Marsac is right, that I think too delicately of them, and am not rough enough.

“Yet is it not strange that a man’s life should be thrown out of joint by some slip of a girl? It is a madness that remains a madness until it is satisfied.

“What do I ask of Luce that any wench could not give me? Why is it Luce, and Luce alone? Her eyes, her hair, her voice, her every movement, seem more than mere figments of the flesh. Is it the soul of her I desire, the invisible flame in her dear body? It burns my hands and my heart, and she does not care.

“Sometimes I am driven to think that I am one of those men whom no woman can bring herself to touch. We have not the subtle animal smell. We are too swarthy,

or too austere, too mild ; we have not that something in the eyes or the voice. I am almost tempted to believe that a woman is not attracted by goodness or by chivalry. We ask ; we do not seize. A woman prefers the man who seizes.

" To-day I have seen a thing that astonished me. There is a girl in this lane. She has fine hair, and an innocent, gentle face, and eyes like a wet blue sky. Nothing could seem more coy and virginal and saint-like. And I saw a hairy man, all sweat and coal-dust, come out of an entry and call to her. She went to him and gave herself to be clawed and kissed, and I heard her laughing in the dusk and talking like a wanton. My heart was absurdly sad because of it.

" What a fool I am.

" I think I understand Marsac's love for his sword.

" I have had no letter from Luce, nor have I had the heart to write to her. They come to London after the New Year, if the plague has not increased again.

" What is a man to think of her mother ? It baffles me.

" Mrs. Jordan's two nieces have come to live here. They seem merry wenches. The dark one is always meeting me on the stairs."

Fairfax worked hard at his sword-play. This lesson was always given in private and before Marsac's patrons strolled in to make the fencing-school like a coffee-house or a tavern. Marsac had begun to encourage him with a little praise, and it was an undoubted fact that John's fencing improved very markedly after his return from Shere. He had come again to one of the drifting seasons of his life, and in his struggle against the poltroonery of his pessimism he anchored himself to this cult of the sword, and gave to it all the passion of a baulked desire. He seemed swifter, fiercer, stronger, less cautious but more cunning. Once or twice a week Marsac brought in some friend and made John fence with him for the sake of the experience to be gained from playing with a strange opponent. The "*Manière de Marsac*" was banned on these occasions, but Fairfax found that he was beginning to hold his own. Marsac would watch him most carefully, and correct him with the loving severity of a father.

"Stop! Never do that, Jack! Never! A smart sword would have had you.

"Remember the motto—'To give, but not to receive.' Never let your wrist slacken. Press your man. Show no mercy.

"You can beat a man with your eyes. Scare him. There is the look of the man who kills."

As to his body, Fairfax knew himself to be far stronger and more fit than those men who ate and drank too much and hunted after women. Fairfax had his boat and his waterman, one of the best oars on the river, and he was out most days with Green, his man, pulling up to Chelsea or Barn Elms. Green's small brother would come as coxswain. Now and again they raced another boat, and only once were they beaten.

About that time Fairfax had his eyes drawn to the girl Nell Jordan. She was a black-haired, lissom wench, with bold eyes and a hot temper, and a mouth like a piece of scarlet thread. Fairfax was very innocent as to women. A good many men visited the house, but it is doubtful whether Fairfax was aware of it, for he was shut up in his room at night, writing or reading. Nor did he notice that Nell had a little white patch on her lower lip, for nearly always he met her in the half-light of the entry or on the stairs. The girl was wanton and as malicious as a wild cat.

Coming home in the dusk, about ten days before Christmas, he pushed against the girl at the foot of the stairs.

"La, Mr. Fairfax, how dark it is!"

She laughed, a laugh that was a challenge, and then raced up the stairs.

"Your fire is out, and the candle unlit," she called to him. "Come and see what a good girl I can be."

When he entered the room Nell was kneeling in front of the grate with the tinder-box on her knees. He could see her as a vague shape in the darkness, also the whiteness of her face. Suddenly she cried out:

"Oh, I have hurt myself!"

Fairfax was by the window overlooking the lane.

"What have you done?"

"Struck my fingers."

"Give me the box," he said. "I will light this candle."

She gave him the tinder-box, but it took him nearly a minute to get the tinder kindled. Nell was sucking a scratched knuckle and thinking him a fool. Fairfax managed to light the candle in the sconce by the window, and directly he had lit it she jumped up and went to him.

"Look! My poor fingers!"

He smiled at her kindly, quite unsuspecting and untempted.

"Poor little girl!"

"Aren't you sorry, sir?"

"Of course."

Next moment her arms were round his neck, her red mouth seeking his; but he threw his head back, and her lips brushed his chin. He saw her eyes harden, and thinking of her as a mischievous child, he felt sorry for having flinched from her mouth, and bending, kissed her forehead.

She broke free, laughing.

"La, you can't kiss, Mr. Fairfax. I'll go and fetch some hot cinders for the fire."

A man had been standing under the hood of the doorway of the stone house on the other side of the lane, watching Fairfax's window. He had seen it lit up by the candle, and Nell's arms round Fairfax's neck, and he had seen Fairfax kiss her.

"Here's food for the jealous lady!"

He crossed to Mrs. Jordan's doorway, and found Nell there in the entry. They whispered together.

"Did you see the fool kiss me?"

"Sure."

"He's like a bit of wet bread. I'd have given him what Sam gave me, just out of mischief, but he bobbed his head. Fancy kissing a man's chin! What do I get for this?"

"A guinea. Here it is."

She laughed and put up her face, but the man drew back.

"No, thank you. Keep that for the mealy innocents, my dear. Good night."

He walked away, and the girl slammed the street door.

Two days later Marsac met this same man by daylight in Mrs. Jordan's doorway. The man stared; then Mar-

sac's hand went out, but the man dodged under his arm and bolted. Marsac looked angry, thoughtful, and going above to John's room, found him writing at his table.

"Hallo, Jack! What was Terence O'Connel doing in your doorway?"

"Who?"

"That dirty and broken Irish attorney. He vanished like smoke when I grabbed at him."

"I don't know the man," said Fairfax. "He has nothing to do with me. He may have had business with Mrs. Jordan."

"There are two wenches here, Jack?"

"Mrs. Jordan's nieces. I see nothing of them."

He was wiping his quill and putting away his journal with the unconcerned air of a man who never suspected that he might be the victim of an intrigue.

"I should change my lodging."

Fairfax looked at him with surprise.

"Why? I am comfortable here, and the woman cooks well. What reasons have I?"

Marsac shrugged.

"Just as you please. But I would not stay in a house where that fellow O'Connel was allowed to loaf in the doorway. He smells, Jack, he smells!"

"Well, the perfume does not climb to my room," said Fairfax, smiling, "and I have the air from the river. Mr. O'Connel does not worry me."

Marsac had come to tell Fairfax of a mock duel that was to be fought at his fencing-school between two gentlemen of the town, who had laid a wager that neither could touch the other.

"They came and asked me to judge in the affair, and I have given them the use of my hall to-night, provided they pay for the candles. The sword-play should be worth seeing. Both these men have fought duels."

"Who are they?"

"My Lord Pirrie and Sir Teg Hargreaves."

Fairfax looked grim.

"Hargreaves!"

And then he stood up, one hand resting on his closed journal.

"Hargreaves is not a man whom I can meet," he said, "and yet I should like to see him handle a sword."

"Is he an enemy of yours?"

"He was, and still is. I will tell you the whole tale some day, Prosper. But if I met Hargreaves in your fencing-school it would be swords *sans* buttons for both of us."

"And a coffin for you, Jack. The fellow is a bully, but he has a damnably quick wrist."

He found Fairfax standing in front of him and looking him in the eyes.

"Some day, if I stay in London, I may have to fight this man. Should I stand any chance with him?"

"To-day, hardly a dog's chance."

"In two months' time?"

"Perhaps. You are just at the level, Jack, when a man stays as he is or suddenly jumps upwards. I shall know in a month or so, but I think you will climb."

Fairfax went to Gold Hammer Court, and sitting in the little oak gallery at the end of the hall above and away from the light of the candles, watched Sir Teg Hargreaves and my Lord Pirrie fight their match. Some twenty gentlemen sat on the benches and along the polished table that had been pushed against the wall, and Fairfax looked down on their periwigs and red coats, their red faces and buckled shoes. They were excited, noisy, offering and taking wagers, strong men full of strong meat and drink, mockery and oaths. They made Fairfax think of a yard full of fierce and greedy dogs at feeding time. Marsac was the outstanding figure among them, tall, debonair, a little insolent, knowing that he was the master of any of these loose-mouthed gentlemen. Fairfax admired him. He saw that Marsac was right, both in his skill and in his scorn.

My Lord Pirrie proved no match for Sir Teg Hargreaves, and Fairfax watched Hargreaves with peculiar intentness. He had a feeling that his fate might cross that of this thick-set and arrogantly capable little courtier who had set out to push himself into place and power. Hargreaves fenced with great coolness, a coolness that was insolent. Fairfax judged him to be extraordinarily powerful in the forearm, with a whipcord wrist and a steady eye. The

buttons of the swords had been blackened with soot, and there were two black marks on my Lord Pirrie's shirt in the first half-minute. He had lost the match, but they fenced on for the sport of it.

When the periwigged, silk-coated crowd had gone, Fairfax came down from the darkness of the oak gallery and found Marsac sitting on the table, swinging his long legs. He looked serious, thoughtful.

"That little game-cock can fight."

He glanced at Fairfax with eyes that questioned him, eyes of affection.

"You need tell me nothing," he said; "but if that man has to be fought some day, I will do it myself."

"You?"

"I owe you a life."

Fairfax walked the length of the hall, and then sat himself on the table beside his friend.

"My pride could not accept that. I will tell you how it all happened."

So Marsac heard the tale of the King and Barbara Rackstraw, and how Fairfax, if he showed his face to these gentlemen of fashion, would be spat upon as a coward.

"I must sweat my soul," he said, "to make you that man's master, for run away a second time you cannot. There will be no woman to spoil the plot, Jack?"

"No, no woman. I think you can judge whether I am afraid of dying."

But there was to be a woman, though Fairfax did not foresee it then.

CHAPTER XXXIV

M R. GARRET was dozing in front of the fire when he was roused by the sound of a horse walking up the drive. There was a full moon shining and a sharp frost in the air, and the iron horseshoes rang on the frozen road. Garret went out into the hall and heard a man dismount.

He opened the porch door.

"Who's that?"

The man was fastening the reins to the ring in the post.

"You did not expect me, Garret."

"Lord, sir, is it you? I had no message."

"And I sent no message. The fit took me to spend Christmas here. Will you shout for one of the boys? The horse is sweating and needs rubbing down."

Fairfax walked into his house and took Garret's chair before the log fire in the dining-room.

A servant came to pull off his boots, and a girl with a cloth to lay the table for supper. When Garret returned he found Fairfax sitting staring at the fire, deep in thought, one hand hanging down and the dog Ugly licking it. Fairfax did not appear to feel the dog's tongue, and Garret, with one glance at him, turned about and withdrew.

He did not see Fairfax again that night, nor did he have any speech with him next morning. Fairfax breakfasted at eight, and ordered his horse for nine. He was away when the clock in the turret struck the hour, and riding for the downs with the Christmas sunlight on his right shoulder.

No one saw him return, for the servants had brought in a fiddler and were dancing in the kitchen. His horse was found in the stable, unsaddled and unbitted, and strawed down for the night. A boy who had overeaten himself and had run out into the garden saw Fairfax

walking along the yew hedge, whose blackness cut the yellow sunset. The boy told Garret, and Garret went out into the garden; but when he saw his master walking under the cedars he thought better of it and left him alone.

Fairfax remained in the garden until eight o'clock, with the moon shining through the cedars and the grass crisp under his feet. Love had sent him on this wild ride, and a fierce restlessness that had longed to see and to touch. He had found a Christmas party at Fernhurst, and a playful and arch my Lady who had received him with enthusiasm and tapped him with her fan.

"Oh, you wild fellow, you wicked man!"

Luce had been standing talking to a handsome old man in a brown periwig and a red coat, and the firelight had made a sheen about her black silk dress. She had looked for a moment at John with eyes that had seemed dark and strange, curtsied to him, and turned again to her neighbour.

A little later he had seized a chance to put himself at her side.

"You did not guess that I should ride thirty miles?"

She had looked past him, over his shoulder, her eyes hard and opaque, her mouth a fierce red line.

"I did not expect you," she had said.

And suddenly she had turned away, walked across the room, and stood talking for a minute with great calmness to an old lady seated in a high-backed chair. Fairfax had remained where he was, watching her with passionate and silent wonder. What offence had he committed? What subtle cause had she to be offended?

He had seen her leave the room, and she had not returned until the big bell had rung for dinner. Fairfax had found himself near the bottom of the table, with the parson of the parish on his right and Luce some six chairs above him and on the opposite side of the board. Her face had had a veiled white coldness. She had never once looked towards him, nor had he seen her smile.

His anger made him swear that she should uncover the meaning of this coldness. Deliberately and with steady eyes he had followed her into the withdrawing-room and touched her arm.

"Luce."

"Do not touch me, please."

"What have I done, or not done?"

She had stood straight and proud in front of him, not flinching, her eyes meeting his.

"London seems fatal to you, Mr. Fairfax."

"Luce, I do not know what you mean."

"Think of my meaning on your way home. It should be easy for you to discover it."

"Is it because I have written no letter?"

She had given him a look of steady judgment.

"No. Do not ask me to give you any reason, for I cannot do it."

Catharine Paradell had parted them.

"John, you must not quarrel with your ward on Christmas Day."

"I must speak to you, madam."

"My dear man, come here into the window. I cannot have a scene."

"What has happened to Luce?"

"Luce! Luce is a little prude, John. Let her be. Girls at her age are made of moods. Do not vex her."

"Assuredly I will not vex her," he had said. "I too have some pride."

And he had gone out in anger and ridden back to Shere.

At night, when all the guests had gone to their beds, my Lady entered Luce's room and found her brushing her hair in front of the fire. Catharine Paradell leant an elbow on the mantelshelf, yawned, and began to talk.

"You have a fine fleece of hair, child. Why were you so unkind to poor John to-day?"

Luce, without looking at her mother, answered her with another question.

"What did he say to you?"

"He was angry on account of your coldness, and because of an accusation that he said he could not understand. I accused him of nothing. Men are such clumsy animals, and John could not even pretend to be astonished that we knew of his gay life."

Luce tossed her hair.

"Gay life! But what did he say?"

"Nothing. He walked off in a rage, for he could not deny it. But, my dear, I should never have breathed old Sir Martin Saker's gossip to you, had I thought it would have made you so bitter. All men are alike."

Luce stared at the fire. She did not believe that Catharine Paradell was lying, or that it was her mother who had planned to have John's lodging watched.

"If you had not told me I should have hated you."

My Lady tried to caress her, and was repulsed.

"I never suspected that you cared for John, child. I am sorry."

"I do not care for him, but I respected him."

Catharine Paradell laughed.

"Oh, my dear, what a little Puritan you are! Shall we ever find you a husband?"

"Don't, Mother! I wish to be left alone. Will you please go?"

My Lady left her, and Luce sat on till the fire was a heap of glowing ash. She felt humiliated, angry, angry with John and with herself, and so out of love with all the romance of life that her heart hardened itself against John Fairfax. She was in a wounded mood, and ready to believe that he was living in London with some wench as his mistress. Her pride drew away with a gesture of disgust. An illusion had been shattered, and she chose to stare with a little shiver of wilful cynicism at the fragments. Nell Jordan as his mistress. It was incredible, and yet Luce made herself believe it. The saying is not always true that we believe what we wish to believe. The psychology of love is inverted, wayward, passionate. And John had dared to come straight from that house in Lantern Lane and make love to her! She went to bed believing that she hated him.

Two days later Fairfax was back in London, having loved himself too little and Luce too much to ride again to Fernhurst and take by force what he could not win by tenderness. He had yet to learn how to master a woman's heart, even as he had yet to learn the full mastery of the sword; but if he had been angered and wounded by the woman, his passion to master the weapon that should not fail him grew all the greater. He turned into Gold

Hammer Court on his way to his lodging, and found Marsac playing at chess with a stout little man who rolled in his chair like a ship anchored in a swell.

Marsac jumped up so carelessly that he upset the board. The little man smiled like a happy baby, and began to whistle and pick up the pieces.

" Jack, this is Mr. Framp."

Fairfax bowed, not knowing Mr. Framp from Adam.

" It is an honour to me, sir," said the little man. " I owe you a crown."

" I should have checkmated him in three minutes, and we had a crown on the game. How is the country, Jack ?"

" Damnable. I came to see whether those rooms are still empty."

" You will join me here ?"

" Yes."

" Good man."

Fairfax got on his horse again, left him at the stables of the Mitre Inn, and walked on to Lantern Lane. He was not expected here till the New Year, and he had let himself into the house in the dusk, and had his foot on the stairs, when he heard a sudden scuffling and a woman's frightened voice :

" Lud, who's that ?"

A door opened and Mrs. Jordan came out from the kitchen, holding a lighted taper.

" Bless me, Mr. Fairfax ! Why, sir, we never thought—— Come into the kitchen, sir, and warm yourself. There's no fire in your room, but we will put that right in a jiffy."

" If you will send me up a shovelful of hot cinders, Mrs. Jordan."

" Yes, sir ; but do you come and sit by the fire till the room is warmed and aired, sir."

It dawned on Fairfax suddenly that she did not wish him to go upstairs to his room, and being in a bitter mood he flouted her and went. She stood there at the foot of the stairs, holding the taper, a look of helplessness on her yellow face.

" Devil take the fool !"

And suddenly she began to scream.

"Nell, Nell, damn you. Didn't I say——"

She was in the midst of her cursing when she heard Fairfax returning, and when she saw his face she swallowed, stood back, and then began to scream at him.

"It's my house, ain't it? Damn you, get out, and don't look at me like that. None of your things have been touched, not one of them, Mr. Propriety."

Fairfax walked out into the street.

"I will send a porter," he said in a small, hard voice.

"I am sorry for this."

"Devil take your sorrow!" screamed the woman. "If I hadn't lodged such a cockle-headed bit of morality—— Get out, I say!"

And Fairfax left her screaming.

Thanks to these Jordan women, Lantern Lane, with all its memories of the plague, Mr. Marbury and Prosper Marsac, was to do Fairfax a yet greater disservice. Luce Paradell had opened her window to the stars and seen in the sky the light of the Flame Invisible. A cry of pain and of loneliness had escaped from her lips. She found herself as ready to believe in John as she had been ready to disbelieve in him. A sudden tenderness awoke with the new mood, and with it came a reflux of all her ideals and her more passionate memories.

She put pen to paper and wrote to Fairfax, compelling herself to write words that she hated, but shirking nothing in the frankness of her confession. She accused herself and she accused the tongues of others.

"If you will tell me, John, that this thing is a lie, I shall believe you and be happy."

A servant was riding to town on some errand of my Lady's, and Luce gave him the letter. On the cover was written: "To Mr. John Fairfax, at Mrs. Jordan's House in Lantern Lane."

"You will deliver this for me, Martin, without fail."

"It shall not fail, miss," said the man, and he was as good as his word.

Nell Jordan opened the door to the man, heard his question, and looked at the address upon the letter. The mischievous devil in her laughed in her eyes. Fairfax

had left Lantern Lane two days ago, but Nell Jordan had a debt outstanding against him.

"Mr. Fairfax is not in the house, but I will put the letter on his table."

She tore it open when Martin had gone, and screaming with laughter, read it out to the other women in the kitchen. They cackled like hens over an egg. Nell went through all the stage gestures of a lover, kissing the letter, pressing it to her little plump bosom, holding it exultantly in the air.

"I feel that I have wronged you. La, but she didn't give him what he wanted! She loves me, she loves me not. Try holding her tight, my boy."

She finished by tearing up the letter and throwing it into the fire, so that Fairfax's reply to it was a damning silence, a silence that repulsed Luce's generous impulse and left him to be condemned.

Marsac, master of swords and of men, was aware of a change in Fairfax, an overclouding of the serenity that had carried him through the worst weeks of the Plague. He was restless, moody, leaving his books and his journal untouched, always in the streets or on the river. He began to develop a sombre recklessness, a cynicism that had a touch of fanatical fire. But the most significant transformation was physical. He appeared to have thrown off a skin of soft and lethargic sentiment, and with it a self-conscious attitude towards the action of life, an attitude that had made him a trifle slow and deliberate in his movements. The change showed itself in his fencing, and Marsac was astonished at it. There was a new fierceness, a speed in his sword-play. He began to handle a blade with the precision and cunning of a master, easily, even brilliantly. From patient and steady correctness he jumped suddenly to the inspired skill that cannot be taught. He could press Marsac hard, make him fight in earnest, and score hits that were not scored on sufferance.

"What has happened to you, Jack?"

"I think that I have learnt the lust to kill."

He was serious over it, frowning, with no laughter in his eyes.

"I want to fight a man without a button on my sword, to stand up to the naked point."

Marsac looked at him queerly.

"Is it that particular man?"

"Perhaps. Or any man who crosses my temper. I have been fooled so often that I want to strike back."

They said no more that night. Fairfax went to his bed, and after he had gone Marsac had a visitor. It was that little round cherub of a man who had played chess with him, Mr. Samson Framp, secretary and man of affairs, and the servant of one of the most notable gentlemen in the kingdom.

Fairfax met Marsac at breakfast, and the Frenchman was in great spirits. Every wire of him was tense and vibrant. He had been tuned by the key of adventure.

"Would you like a good swashbuckling night, Jack, with your chin cocked and your ears on the jump under the full moon? Lord, if you weren't such a peaceful blade——"

"What happens?" John asked him, cutting a slice of bread.

"I go out to prevent murder. Six bullies from Whitefriars, perhaps, all in a hurry to hit a certain very gallant gentleman in the back."

"Hired for the night?"

"Precisely. But this same gallant gentleman has a flash of the eye and a daring temper. I owe him a man's debt and I pay it. He sent me a message: 'Come and help me to give these scoundrels a lesson.'"

"You go alone," said John, "the two of you?"

"Yes."

"And what is it about? A woman?"

"The origin of everything. But my gentleman is honourable, and so is the lady, and the man who has been baulked by their honour hires bravoës in Whitefriars."

"Let me go with you," said Fairfax over the table.

"In earnest, John?"

"In grim earnest."

"Then, by the Lord, you shall."

So Fairfax had his blooding, and his first experience of such an adventure in a London street at midnight.

He found himself strangely callous and very cool. They waited in the shelter of a doorway in a certain street near Covent Garden, cloaks drawn, hats pulled down over their faces. Someone spoke with Marsac through the grille, and then a very tall man came out, and in the moonlight Fairfax saw him smile.

"I am grateful to you two gentlemen for waiting out in the cold."

He had the grand manner, the fine courtesy that is never flustered or afraid.

"You have seen nothing of our friends?"

"Nothing, sir."

"I know where we may expect them. At the end of Cock Alley, past where it opens into these gardens. I have passed that way every night."

His prophecy proved true. They had cleared the alley and were in an open space flooded by the light of the moon when a bunch of figures budded suddenly out of some gateway and spread into a half-circle. No words were spoken, though Marsac gave John a whisper: "*La Manière de Marsac, Jack.*" These gentlemen believed that they had caught my Lord walking home with two servants, but they were undeceived when the three turned on them and attacked. It was over in less than half a minute. Fairfax had found his man pitifully easy to kill, and he had hardly realized that the poor devil had it in his body until he heard his squeals. Marsac had put out another man; my Lord had done likewise. The others fled.

Marsac seized John in his arms.

"A musketeer of the Guards! Man, I taught you to do it!"

"My friends," said my Lord, putting up his sword, "it would be vexing to be questioned by the watch. Shall we be going?"

The last memories Fairfax had of that adventure were of three men lying dead in the moonlight, and of Marsac wiping his sword on the back of one man's breeches.

CHAPTER XXXV

IN the month of February the King and the Court returned to Whitehall.

My Lady had waited for the return of the sun, and at the end of February the Fernhurst coach passed two days in labour on the muddy roads, hung about with baggage, and followed by the light wagon that carried yet more baggage and the maids and lackeys. The coach drew up outside the house in King Street, where the roofs and chimneys were turning black against a yellow sunset. A gentleman in plum-coloured velvet, and wearing a handsome periwig and a silver-hilted sword, stood on the footway to give a hand to the ladies.

It was John Fairfax.

My Lady looked at him with widely open eyes, displeased and surprised, but too shrewd to show it.

"Why, Mr. John, how is this?"

He bowed over her hand.

"I knew that you were expected to-day, and I could not deny myself the pleasure of welcoming you."

She looked at him again, and was aware of a significant change in Fairfax. He was handsomely dressed, and carried himself like a man of fashion. He had something approaching the grand air, a restrained audacity, a composure that could seem insolent. There was no shyness in his eyes. They looked my Lady boldly in the face even while he was making pretty speeches.

Luce was behind him, a Luce in a hood and cloak of furs, pale, surprised, silent. She had thrown John a quick look, and then masked herself with indifference, but she had seen what her mother had seen. This man made her feel that he was a stranger.

Fairfax bowed to her and offered his arm to her mother.

"I shall not vex you by staying. Be careful of the step, madam."

In the hall he disentangled himself cleverly, and smiling, his hat held in front of him, bowed slightly to Luce.

"May I have three words with my ward?"

My Lady glanced from one to the other. Fairfax was looking straight into Luce's face. Luce's hands were clasped together under her cloak; she was white as a frost.

"The child is tired, John."

"If she is tired I will release her, but if she is afraid——"

Luce's lips and eyes seemed to come to life. There was a smouldering colour on her face.

"I am not tired, neither am I afraid."

She spoke quickly, with a voice that was like a wire stretched between curiosity and anger. A door on the right led into the dining-room, and they could see a fire burning on the hearth and throwing its flames gaily into the throat of the chimney. Luce walked into the room, unfastening her furs and putting back her hood. Her mother hesitated, but Fairfax cut the thread of her indecision.

"It is necessary, madam; it is even wise for you to oblige me."

She gave him a false smile.

"I remember you are her guardian."

Fairfax followed Luce into the room, closing the door after him. She was standing by the fire, and when he entered she turned and looked at him with a young girl's haughtiness. Her thin, dark beauty, sleeked in its rich furs and warmed by the fire, was a beauty that touched him like a sudden pain. Her eyes were brilliant, vaguely hostile. He had to steady his senses and harden himself against her.

"Well?"

He pretended to be gay, almost ironical.

"Why has my ward neglected to write to me?"

He saw her eyes widen.

"Was it my duty to write?"

"Do you remember, Luce, how you treated me at Christmas? You accused me of some vague dishonour,

though how I had offended you I could not understand. Was I to humiliate myself by asking you for your accusation ? ”

He stood leaning against the heavy oak table, not the John Fairfax she had known of old, the man of sombre and sensitive moods, but a John Fairfax who was a stranger.

“ Then why do you come here ? ”

“ My dear,” he said coolly, “ I am here as your guardian, not as the fool of sentiment. I ask my ward why she has shown me so little affection and respect.”

He saw her droop a little, and then flash round on him.

“ I sent you a letter soon after Christmas.”

“ It never reached me.”

“ But it was delivered at your lodging.”

“ Which lodging ? ”

“ Mrs. Jordan’s in Lantern Lane.”

Fairfax’s eyes seemed to catch the light of the fire, but Luce’s eyes were sombre and troubled.

“ I had left that lodging. I left it because I found the people in the house were people of bad character. I can guess what happened to your letter. They took it for the pleasure of doing me an ill turn, and put it in the fire.”

She made an almost imperceptible movement towards him. He was aware of a quick tremor of light in her eyes, a softening of her mouth, a melting of her rigid aloofness.

“ John ! ”

Then Fairfax did the thing that he had schooled himself to do. He laughed.

“ Well, that explains it. Your guardian forgives you. I do not know what was in that letter, Luce. Did it accuse me of anything ? ”

She shrank a little, trying to cover up a feeling of having been repulsed, and to match herself against this new John Fairfax, whose coolness roused in her a little bewildered mood of surprise.

“ No.”

“ Why, then, we are very good friends again, Luce. It would grieve me to think that there was any misunderstanding between us. You are tired, child, and I’ll keep you talking no longer.”

He went and took her hand, and bowing over it, kissed her fingers with formal courtesy.

"I shall give myself the pleasure of calling on you and your mother."

He smiled, and walking to the door, turned as though he had remembered something.

"I am lodging with the Chevalier de Marsac in Gold Hammer Court, off the Strand. I am always at your service, Luce. A letter or a message will find me there."

He bowed again and left her, and as he walked down King Street he smiled.

"How easy the trick is," he thought; "and that I began to learn it after I had killed a man! Do women ask for love to be baptized in blood? I wonder."

Fairfax walked for an hour along the lanes and paths among the gardens on the outskirts of Westminster, watching the afterglow fade and the stars come out. There had been a touch of crimson in the sky, a note of passion, and Fairfax had watched it change to an opalescent greyness and melt into the night. He felt that he understood life as he had never understood it before, its laughter, its tears, its little prides and whimsies, its love of illusions, its strange physical attractions and repulsions, its fastidious prejudices, its sudden inexplicable surrenders. He had come to suspect that someone had slandered him to Luce, and he did not doubt but that it was her mother. That letter would have explained so much; but Fairfax had done with excuses and explanations.

Life was to the strong and masterful, the men who said: "I am" and "I will," the men who refused to be seduced by pity. If half life was make-believe, was it not necessary that a man should believe in the one thing that mattered—himself? Why stand in modest doubt, ready to apologize, to explain, a sensitive critic of one's own deficiencies, too soft to grasp, a sort of parliament of minor virtues ever ready to blush or to chatter. Did love come in that way, with a soft step and servility in its sheep's smile? What did the world love in a man—a brutality that succeeded? Men have worshipped fanatics, because men long to be convinced. Women ask to be mastered before they can exult in the passion of surrender.

"An illusion, always an illusion," said Fairfax, addressing the stars, "the illusion of love, or of patriotism, or of sanctity, or of the splendour of riches. Man must strive, or go back to feed with the swine. And yet life is good—the life of the moment. It is good to kiss the woman you love, to feel your sword enter the body of your enemy, to ride with your friend on a frosty morning and find your hunger laughing like a boy. Give thy body a chance, man, thy good, honest, swaggering body, and forget to physic thy soul."

Returning to Gold Hammer Court, he found a group of urchins round Marsac's door, sitting on the steps under the swinging lantern. He waded through them, gently cuffing one tow-headed child whose cheeky blue eyes looked up into his. In the room above Marsac was teaching Mr. Marbury to throw dice, for the wise education of his soul.

"This is a most scandalous scene," said John, "and Marbury has left all his family below."

"Get along with you," said the little parson; "those children will not be dissuaded from hanging to my coat. They have a link to light me here."

Marsac rattled the dice.

"Jack, have you noticed how he frequents the houses of bullies and gentlemen of fashion? It is a sign of the times."

"You are desperate blackguards, both of you," laughed the little man; "that is why I love you so much."

Fairfax unfastened his sword, and, going above to his own room, returned with a dish of cakes.

"You had better feed the family, Mr. Marbury."

"Bless your heart, my friend. Hallo—Perkins—come up for a dish of cakes."

He shouted out of the window, and the whole crowd stormed the stairs and scuffled in the doorway.

"Manners, manners, you little rogues. Take your cakes and thank the gentleman. And have that link alight, Perkins, in five minutes."

The children returned to the doorstep and the yellow circle of light under the lantern, while Mr. Marbury stood in the middle of the room and made a confession.

"Publicans and sinners—I love them all."

"Listen, Jack! what are you, a publican or a sinner, or both?"

"Yes, Chevalier, you scoff, but it is the man who scoffs who is the first to put out a generous hand. I know you both. God save us from the careful, precise people. They never learn how to love."

He had the light of vision in his eyes, and his ugly, commonplace face shone upon both of them.

"Yes, let men curse, but go on loving; let them dice and drink, but still go on loving, and they will be saved. You know it, I know it. Why, damn it, what else is there to live for?"

And then he picked up his hat and got out of the room with great expedition, and they heard him march out of the court with his party of scallywag children.

Fairfax and Marsac looked at each other.

"Was that a sermon, Jack?"

"The best that he ever preached."

For a week Fairfax did not go near the house in King Street, though his heart cried out each morning: "Luce is in London." Luce expected him and he did not come. The unexpectedness of his absence was good for her interest in him, piquing her pride, and making her virginal self-sufficiency less of a tradition. There were moments when she suspected that John Fairfax had grown much bigger than herself, so big that he looked over her head. For at that period of her life Luce was neither the child nor the woman. She had forgotten how to play and had not quite learnt how to feel. She was inclined to be a little fastidious and shy of her own emotions, a white bud that would not allow that its petals were tinged with red. The Bellasis affair had shocked the sensitive and potential woman in her, and, however much she might despise her mother's cynicism, it had helped to make her too introspective and self-conscious.

Moreover, at the end of her first week, she knew that her beauty had made men and women look at her. She was lithe and dark and mysterious and chaste. She had beautiful clothes, she did not talk much, and she was conscious of power; yet on the very threshold of her first

triumph she had leisure to think that she had lost her power over Fairfax. No woman is pleased by such a discovery, and Luce was in the first buoyant and delightful morning of her vanity.

When at last Fairfax came to King Street she set out to fight him like a woman of spirit. She felt that he had had the advantage of her on the day when he had met their coach; in fact, she knew it, and something in her resented his victory. She had liked John very well when he had been sensitive, and generous, and shy of her, and so helplessly in love. It seemed that he was helpless no longer, and she was posed by his new hardihood. She did not know whether she liked it or not, and so set out to fight it.

He came and he talked to her mother, and to Brilliana Manners and the other ladies who happened to be there. It was obvious that Mrs. Brilliana was pleased with him. He had wit, a presence and a deep voice. When he walked across to the settle where Luce was sitting he smiled at her as though they shared some secret jest.

"And how is my ward to-day?"

She felt that there was laughter behind his eyes, grim laughter, and she was challenged.

"I am liking life very well," she said; "I have no reason to complain."

"Nor I. I feel that I shall gather a reflected glory."

"Oh, how?"

"From the notable beauty of my very charming ward. My Lady tells me that the men are round you already."

"Oh, men!" she said. "I suppose I am just a honey-pot, a new face."

"But you like it?"

She flashed out at him.

"I do."

The frank fierceness of the avowal seemed to produce in Fairfax a mood of great seriousness.

"Luce, I assure you that my responsibilities are remembered very earnestly."

"Thank you. Am I to parade my likes and dislikes, John, for your consideration?"

"My dear child," he said, "I wish to be able to think

well of the man you may choose to marry. I hold myself to be the guardian of your happiness."

She was given no opportunity of protesting against his gravity and his sententiousness, for her mother's voice broke in on them.

"Mr. Fairfax, shall you be at the Marquis of Mountfort's on Tuesday?"

"What is it, madam, a card party?"

"No, the first great dance since the plague."

"I am growing too old for dancing, madam."

The ladies laughed.

"You are a fisherman, Mr. Fairfax."

"There is still a more potent reason; I have not been invited. Besides, I am engaged elsewhere. You and Luce are going?"

"Yes."

He turned and smiled at Luce.

"I suppose that as her guardian I should be present to watch her conquests? Instead of that, I shall be dicing at Carteret's."

"Oh, shame on you!" said my Lady.

When he bowed himself out he was aware of Luce's eyes watching him with sombre and questioning intentness. She had begun to feel a provoking strength behind his rather preposterous gravity and his assumption of fatherliness. She had seen it in his smile, in his audacity, that new grimness sheathed in a tissue of fooling. She wondered whether she was not beginning to be a little afraid of John.

CHAPTER XXXVI

F AIRFAX did not go to the Marquis of Mountfort's dance, but the lover in him was there, the lover who held wilfully aloof. It was a windy night in March, with a hard and brittle sky, and very cold. Clouds came out of the north and washed the stars away. At midnight it was snowing.

Fairfax's imagination painted a Luce triumphant, and yet threw a shadow of pathos over the picture. She was so gay, so full of the pride of her youth, so unconscious of the disasters that lie in ambush for the soul that is not armed. She made him remember those first weeks of his in London when he had felt so sure of himself, believing that the courage and the splendour and the inspiration of youth were wings that would not fail him. Luce had the same innocence, the same ideals. She had not learnt that the primitive passions are the blood and the flesh of life, the strong body under the superficial clothes, the one reality that never changes under the transfiguration of dress.

"She thinks that a look of the eyes and a wave of a girl's hand can tame men," he wrote in his journal. "We are but beasts. Only the great love that is in some of us brings us to an understanding of the compassion that is God.

"When love is not there, the body is supreme, for the body's love is lust. Lust will lie, and cheat and kill. It dresses itself in fine clothes, and goes to church; it stands devoutly, prayer-book in hand, but its eyes are on the bosom and the throat of the girl in the next pew.

"What is my fate to be? Am I to stand and be slain that this child may be saved from some gentleman of the Court? Or will it be my lot to slay? She is but a wild

bird, singing in a cage, thinking that the sweetness of her singing makes all the world good.

"Meet God with thy soul, but meet the carnal man with thy sword."

Fairfax knew that he had many enemies, and that Luce's mother was the most dangerous of them all, their antipathy being mutual and instinctive, however much it might be concealed by moods and by words. If he saw Luce triumphant, he saw also the wanton eyes of her mother behind her. He felt that there were unexpected fires below that calm, virginal surface.

He would have given much to have stood concealed in the Mountfort's great gallery and have watched Luce make her entry; yet had he been there the night's happenings would have hurt him. She came in through the screens, dressed in old saffron brocade, like a pale flame, and with a knot of amber beads in her black hair. Luce was shy, and hid it with a defiant pride. Men looked at her, and she felt the heat of their glances. She stood by her mother's chair, one hand resting on the carved back, the other hanging and holding her fan. She did not fidget, or glance restlessly about the room, or seem over-eager to speak. It did not distress her to remain silent, and her silence and her stillness made her beauty an inevitable lure.

Sir Martin Jacobus—the wit—was the first man to notice her.

"Tell me the name of the new Cassandra."

His neighbour, a short, thick-set man in yellow, with very vivid blue eyes, held a yawn smothered.

"Too many women here," he said. "God, how they chatter! Brass cats! Where's your lady?"

"Over there, with her hand on the chair of that yellow tabby. Does she pique you, Teg?"

"I'm through with women. I shall marry and settle down."

"And within a year you will be running after every serving-wench in the house. But look at my black vixen."

"You mean that fierce young madam in yellow?"

"I do."

Teg Hargreaves stared.

"The wench has a temper," he said; "I know the Paradell woman. I will go and brow-beat the daughter."

He left old Jacobus snickering and sneering at life, and walked across the room towards Catharine Paradell and Luce. Luce was aware of him long before he reached her mother's chair, for there was a maleness about Hargreaves that made him arrestive, and she was conscious of a peculiar tremor of excitement when she realized that he was coming straight towards them. She had never seen him before, and yet Hargreaves had a most strange and sudden physical effect on her. She felt that she hated him, but it was only a part of her that hated him. The man in him made the woman in her tremble at the knees.

That was how the affair began. Hargreaves was bowing to her mother, and Luce saw that Catharine Paradell was pleased. She knew herself to be the reason for his coming, and that his courtesy was the mere perfunctory opening of a gate.

"Your daughter, madam?"

"Yes, this is Luce."

He bowed to her, and then standing erect, looked her steadily in the face, his head thrust slightly forward, his eyes a blue glare. That long and almost insolent stare was peculiar to the man. To Luce it said, "A woman needs a master," and instinctively she defied him.

"I have not seen you before."

Her eyes held out until he looked away.

"I think you should remember me."

She had coloured. He glanced at her again, half smiling, but his eyes did not light up when he smiled.

"You would not be easy to forget. My dear Lady Paradell, will you tell your daughter——"

My Lady was looking at them both. Her sly eyes were full of flickering light.

"What a quarrelsome couple you would make! Luce, this is Sir Theophilus Egmond Hargreaves."

"Teg for short, Miss Luce. You will have to dance with me."

"That sounds like an order."

"But you will dance?"

"I think not."

He laughed.

"Why, then no more shall I. I came here to go away, and now—I stay."

He brought her a chair, placed it, bowed and besought her to be seated. She looked at the chair, and refused, so he sat on it himself.

"Why should the thing be wasted? I will keep it for you."

My Lady had risen and was moving to meet a friend.

"Luce, you can have my chair. La, there's a compromise for you."

Luce took the vacant chair, and she and Hargreaves sat side by side against the wall, not looking at each other, and not speaking. The musicians in the gallery had opened with a French measure, and Hargreaves watched the dancers. He sat squarely but easily in his chair, untroubled by Luce's silence, and in no haste to propitiate her. Once or twice she gave him a quick, sidelong look, a challenge, and a flash of steel, but if he saw it he ignored it.

Presently she was aware of people watching them, of curiosity and amusement in the great room. The man beside her was unaffected by it, yet his stolidity was not the obtuseness of a fool. Luce felt that she disliked him, and disliked him most fiercely with all the part of her that was sensitive and personal, but there was another part of her that tingled with a nameless excitement. She caught herself wondering what it would be like to be loved by this man. The thought spread into a vivid emotion. She flushed, conscious of a fastidious resentment, and smothered this primitive spasm without trying to analyse it.

Hargreaves pulled out his watch.

"Half an hour. You know how to keep your lips closed."

He looked slowly round at her and she saw the hard blue of his eyes.

"And you?"

He put his watch back.

"I respect a woman who can hold her tongue. Half the men in the room are looking at you."

"What of that?" she asked sharply.

"It means that they envy me. They would be crowding round you if I were not here."

"Are they afraid?"

"I do not choose to be interfered with," he said.

And somehow his arrogance was not arrogant. She guessed that he was not boasting, for there seemed to be a spirit in him that was so strong and triumphant that no one would challenge its right to power.

It occurred to Luce that she could love power. The natural woman in her was dazzled and attracted by it, this male force that John Fairfax seemed to lack. Poor John! And instantly the more sensitive part of her rose to defend him.

"He is chivalrous—and honourable——"

But did chivalry and honour count in the world? Was not strength more potent and splendid?

Hargreaves was standing and bowing to her.

"I have left you in your queenly silence for fully half an hour. Will you dance now?"

The suggestion of "queenliness" pleased her, for it held the thought that was at the back of her conscious vanity. Did not beauty rule man? Was it not a power to be used?

She stood up.

"I will grant you that very great favour."

He looked her straight in the eyes and then bowed again.

"My gratitude is at your feet."

He knew his "woman" by heart, and how this innocent proud wench was to be handled.

My Lady watched them while she fanned herself and prattled to some decrepit gallant. Here, in this great room with its thousand candles, were beauty of sound, of colour and of movement. The arch of a beautiful instep, the poise of some adorable head, the litheness of young limbs, the grace and swagger of strong men! Luce had begun to glow; her eyes were alight. Hargreaves danced like a very great gentleman, protectively, gallantly, as though she were the most sacred lady in the world. But my Lady understood his eyes. She laughed behind her fan.

"He wants her. He wanted her from the first minute." She chirruped to her ancient courtier.

"Are they not well matched? A girl needs a master. I wish something would come of it."

"Everything may come of it; she is your daughter, madam," bleated her infatuated old man.

In Prosper Marsac's house John Fairfax sat in front of his friend's fire watching his dreams fly up the chimney with the sparks from the burning wood. Marsac was at the table reading a French book, and watching John by the fire. Fairfax was restless and his restlessness showed in little changes of posture. Sometimes he tapped the floor with the toe of his boot, or stirred up the logs with the tongs as though it pleased him to see a crackle of sparks shoot up into the chimney. Marsac left him alone. He had guessed that there was a woman.

About ten o'clock Fairfax rose, pulled back the curtain, and opened the lattice. Something white drifted in and lay upon the breast of his coat. It was snowing.

"Is it an omen?" he thought. "I must see her, or I shall not sleep."

He closed the lattice, drew the curtain, and picking up his cloak from a chair, swung it over his shoulders. Marsac had missed nothing of this by-play, and he had seen the snow swirling past the window.

Fairfax took his hat from a peg.

"I shall be late," he said.

"Your blood must be warm, Jack. It's snowing."

"To make her a queen's carpet," was Fairfax's thought.

He turned at the door, and saw Marsac watching him.

"I want a glimpse of her," he said, "as she comes to her coach. You know what the madness is."

"I know it," said the Frenchman.

Fairfax walked in the snow to Lincoln's Inn Fields. He was hungering for a moment's sight of Luce as she came down to her coach, wrapped in her furs, and warm with dancing, yet somehow he had a premonition that the sight of her would wound him. It was easy for him to find Mountfort's great house, for coaches and chairs were moving towards it, and there was a crowd of them and a flare of links by the gates of the courtyard. Coachmen

were flapping their arms, and lackeys running up and down to keep warm.

Fairfax pushed through to the iron gates. They were open, and the space held by two of the Marquis's servants. Even at this hour there were a few poor scallywags waiting to see the gentry come to their coaches; and ready to scramble for a few groats tossed into the snow. These wretches knew that a gentleman is generous when he is warm with wine and the nearness of beautiful women. Fairfax became a part of this little crowd of link-boys, beggars, and lackeys. No one paid any attention to him. A hat and a cloak suggested anything and nothing.

The great house began to empty itself, and there were shouts from the lackeys.

"My Lord Drydale's coach." "Mrs. Emery's chair." "Link boys for Orchard Street. Come on, you pups, come on."

Fairfax watched these gentlefolk pass away into the night, handsome men and comely women, old hags painted to look eighteen, boys who were old at twenty, girls to whom the dancing had given feverish eyes. It was a long time before he heard Catharine Paradell's coach called for, and knew that Luce was near.

He had pulled his hat over his eyes, and moved back behind a man with a wooden leg who announced to all that he had lost the limb of flesh and blood in the streets of Worcester fighting for the king. Fairfax neither saw nor smelt the fellow. He was watching Luce walking down to the iron gates, partnered by a man who wore a cloak of black and silver over his yellow coat and breeches. The man carried his hat in his hand, and was talking to Luce and looking in her face. And Luce was smiling, triumphant in the torch flame.

Fairfax stood very still. He had recognized the man in yellow, and he saw Hargreaves kiss Luce's fingers as he handed her into the coach. In return, looking back, she gave him the flash of a smile. My Lady and her old retainer were close on Hargreaves's heels, but Fairfax broke away. He had seen too much.

The strangeness, the malice of life! That this man of all men should be kissing Luce's fingers! Fairfax

forgot the snow, the cold; the hour of the night, and his love trailed a wounded path, like an animal that drops blood. For the first time in his life he felt the real sex madness of jealousy and hate. This man of all men! The man who had brought him to his first great humiliation, and who still held him in back alleys at the point of the sword.

"Damn him!" said Fairfax, "damn him! I see now where life leads me."

But the last cry of the night was the bitter cry of the lover.

"Luce, Luce—I want you—I want you."

CHAPTER XXXVII

FOR a week Fairfax held aloof from the house in King Street, and it was one of the most unhappy weeks of his life. He could not bring himself to any decision, even though he knew that his jealousy might be the merest illusion, and Luce untouched by such a thing as love. Nor did he speak to Marsac of this affair of the heart. It was told only to his journal.

"What irony," he wrote, "that this man should bow her to her coach and kiss her hand on the night of her triumph. And I saw her smile at him.

"What am I to do, or say, or think? I know this man to be evil, and yet, if the affair prove serious and I go and damn him to her, she will think me jealous and ungenerous, and will cling the closer to him.

"It is not fear that holds me back. I know that if I meet this man he will feel that he has the right to spit in my face and call me coward.

"I wish to think of Luce and her happiness. That Jezebel of a mother would sell her to spite a memory and to spite me."

He fenced each day with Marsac, and when he fenced he felt that he had Hargreaves in front of him, and his sword play had a new and brilliant ferocity.

"The devil, Jack, but do you want to kill me? I don't know what has happened to you, man. You would be dangerous now to the best blade in the kingdom."

Fairfax stood looking at the button of his sword.

"Would you match me against such a man as Hargreaves?"

"The chances would be equal. But why Hargreaves? Are you serious?"

Their eyes met, and Marsac saw death in the eyes of his friend.

"My God, you are serious!"

Fairfax turned away.

"It is on the knees of the gods," he said.

But at the end of the week he laughed to himself and asked what tangle of imaginary miseries he might be weaving. He put on his best clothes, buckled on his sword, and walked with an unexpected serenity to the house in King Street. "Was my Lady at home?"

"To be sure, sir. We have orders to admit you. My Lady has looked for you these seven days."

In the withdrawing-room Catharine Paradell rose to meet him with a glow of coquettish friendliness.

"Why, John, where have you been? And here am I waiting for your advice."

"I have been at my lodgings. If the matter had been urgent——"

"Oh, Mr. Logic, you will never allow that a woman has sense! Besides, the romance goes so prettily that it seems a shame to ask solemn questions."

Fairfax sat down with his back to the light. My Lady's animation was as artificial as her sentiments, and she was in one of those poisonous, gay moods when a woman's malice dances to the music of success. Fairfax guessed that she had news for him and was exulting in making it known.

"Will you explain?" he asked her.

"My dear John, it concerns you as Luce's guardian. Your ward seems likely to make a great match, and all in the blink of an eyelid. Now, to begin with——"

"Who is the man?"

"How you keep to the point! Perhaps you have heard of Sir Teg Hargreaves?"

She was smiling and watching for his utter embarrassment when she threw the name of Hargreaves at him. She had John in the toils, tangled in that most discreditable incident of two years ago. Here was the one man whom he could not interfere with, and who would kill him if he interfered.

Fairfax understood all this. She knew his secret, and he guessed that she counted on his being a coward. Her cordiality helped him to keep his temper.

"I have heard of Sir Teg Hargreaves."

He looked at her steadily and decided for frankness.

"I imagine that you know that I left London some two years ago as a disgraced man, and that this man was the cause of it."

"Why drag in the past, John?"

She was ready to be sympathetic, but Fairfax chose to be steel.

"Is this affair serious?"

"Amazingly serious."

"With Luce, I mean?"

"She likes him very well, John. And the man is infatuated."

"He has been infatuated many times, I believe."

My Lady stared.

"Now, my dear, you are not going to resurrect some old scandal! Is there a man living who has not had his adventures?"

"Let us keep to Hargreaves. He is ambitious, he has been very successful, they say that he has become an intimate friend of the King's. He has been knighted. But he is a beast and a bully."

"My dear John. Pray be careful. Sir Teg is not a man to suffer such things to be said of him, and you might regret it."

Fairfax smiled at her with peculiar grimness.

"Do not count on my playing the coward. If such things have to be said at any time to this man, I myself will say them. But at present it is not necessary. But Luce should know."

"You mean, John, how you ran away——"

He still smiled at her.

"It did not happen like that. I was a fool and not a coward. No. Luce must know her lover's reputation."

"And who will tell her?"

"I shall," he said calmly.

He saw at once that he had spoilt both her pleasure and her temper.

"Dear Lord, what a mean hound you are! And then, I suppose—you will ask Luce to marry you?"

Fairfax's eyes seemed to grow deep with some hardly concealed emotion.

"No, that will be the great reason why I shall not be able to ask her to marry me. In telling her the truth about Hargreaves, I shall have to prove my sincerity, and I shall prove it."

She flamed out at him.

"Very well; tell her! If she has any spirit in her she will despise you most cordially."

"That is my punishment," he said.

She flung out of the room, leaving Fairfax to reflect upon the path of danger he had chosen. He had formed it upon the right and generous impulse of the moment, and as he stood by the window and looked down into the street, he knew that he had once more gained a glimpse of the Flame Invisible, and that the path of danger was the path of light. He wondered whether Luce was in the house, and he was about to call one of the servants when he heard a coach coming up the street, and, looking out, recognized the Paradell colours. The coach stopped outside the door, and the footman sprang down and drew back the leather curtains.

As she stepped out Luce looked up at the window and saw Fairfax there. She smiled at him with her eyes, and he thought that he had never seen her look more happy. It came to him that in her innocence she might love this man, and that his fate was to break the picture that her innocence had painted.

For a moment he hesitated and was afraid. Would she not hate him till the end of her days?—and his heart cried out against such a hatred. What a damnable tangle life had been for him; always some false position, some unconvincing attitude. And then he heard my Lady's voice, clear and challenging. She had met Luce on the stairs.

"John is here, child. He has something to say to you."

For once in his life Fairfax blessed her malice, for it sent him forward in the path that he had chosen.

Luce came to him with something of the self-conscious serenity of a young queen. Her beauty glowed in the spring of her first triumph. Her darkness, the blue-black lustre of her eyes, her red lips, the white warmth of her skin, all these opened the wound of Fairfax's love for her.

"You are quite a stranger, John."

She was not afraid of him to-day; men seemed such easy things to conquer, and this man's devotion had become traditional.

"Your mother has told you, Luce."

She looked at his serious and compassionate face.

"I am very happy, John, and you are so solemn."

He was overcome by a moment's bitterness.

"Yes, I have always been solemn," and then he became very gentle.

"Will you sit down, Luce? I have something that is not easy to say."

He saw that she was ready to resent his gravity.

"Am I to be scolded——?"

"God forbid! Will you listen to me with patience? It is harder for me than for you."

She sat down on one of the tall, carved chairs by the fire, and Fairfax remained at the window, leaning against the ledge, and watching her with eyes of tenderness. She kept her face half averted while he was speaking, and whether he touched her heart or not he could not tell.

"You know that I love you, Luce?"

"Perhaps."

"You remember that day in your father's room? It is very vivid to me now, for then I took your happiness upon my shoulders. I love you with all my heart and soul, and I tell you this because I may never speak to you of my love again."

He paused, but she did not turn her head to look at him.

"I do not understand you," she said.

"I will remedy that. You know what happened to me two years ago, and how the world branded me as a coward. Yes, I see that you know it. I was to fight on a matter of honour with a certain Sir Teg Hargreaves, but someone interfered. My life was saved—and my honour gone."

She gave him a quick and almost hard look.

"Why do you tell me this?"

"Because it is necessary, for otherwise you might accuse me of malice. But I hope to prove to you that it is not malice, that if I speak to you of this man Hargreaves——"

She grew rigid, haughty.

" Why do you speak to me of him ? "

" I am told, Luce, that it is likely that he may wish to marry you."

" Well ? "

Her eyes were defiant.

" He is not the man you should marry."

She left the chair and began to walk up and down.

" By what right do you interfere ? And why come to me ? Is it not rather cowardly to come and sneak to a woman ? "

" This man is no mate for you. I am ready to tell him so to his own face, but my duty is to you and not to him."

" And what do you know against him ? "

" Do you ask me to tell you that ? "

" Of course I ask it. I demand it."

" Then you love him, Luce ? "

" Yes—no. But that is my affair. Is he a coward ? "

" No."

" A gambler ? "

" In a sense—yes."

" Has he——? "

But she broke away from the question with a shrug of impatience and of rage.

" Well, out with it. I am your ward ; you think it is my duty to listen."

" Luce, I know this man to be a profligate scoundrel. Your mother knows it ; all the world of Whitehall knows it."

She turned on him with a strange, white fury. He did not understand her anger, and how a great part of it was against herself. She was both attracted and repelled, dazzled and disgusted, and furious that John should take sides with her against passion. What right had he to meddle ? She could manage her own affairs.

" Thank you, John," she said ; " thank you. No one can say that I have not had my warning. But has it not occurred to you that a man may have good in him and that he may hate the past ? It is possible for a man to be brave and generous."

He looked at her with great sadness.

" I implore you not to marry him, Luce "

"And some day you may ask me——"

He straightened like a swordsman saluting the man whom he means to kill.

"Never. That is my proof and my pledge, the badge of my sincerity—I will never speak to you of love again. I will never come near you unless you bid me. That is my answer."

He picked up his hat from the table and walked towards the door. And perhaps, for the first time in his life, he had impressed her, struck fire from the cold surface of her youth. She watched him open the door, and then called him back.

"John."

He turned. The defiance was out of her voice.

"What will you do if I find I love this man?"

She saw him flinch, and his eyes light up.

"Nothing," he said; "I shall not put myself in the way. A woman must choose."

He turned again, but paused in the doorway. He felt that she had not finished.

"Shall I see you again, John?"

"Not unless you send for me. I shall keep my promise."

"And you are still my friend?"

"Always your friend. Send for me and I shall come."

She had a glimpse of his sad and compassionate face, and then the door closed, and she heard his footsteps on the stairs. A strange loneliness seized her, a doubt of her own judgment, and for a moment she was tempted to call him back.

Her pride reasserted itself.

"I will show him that I can choose my own path. He thinks me a child."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

F AIRFAX betrayed the spirit of fatalism that now possessed him by walking daily through the streets of Westminster, even by showing himself in the parks. A month ago he would have been more sensitive in his attitude towards the world of fashion that had returned to London since the decrease of the plague, but now he felt that his personal pride need shrink no longer from casual insult. He had followed the light of the Flame Invisible, and he could meet any man with the sword. He had fought the plague, when these debonair and dissolute gentlemen had disappeared into the country. And life was not so sweet to him now that he seemed on the high-road towards losing Luce.

Once he met Trevanion in Pall Mall, and that lean and profligate cynic, with the hungry mouth and libidinous eyes, jerked a look at him and passed on. On another day he met the King walking with his gentlemen in St. James's, but Charles did not see him, nor did Fairfax ask to be seen. The Court was said to be growing very dissolute, but whenever Fairfax heard one speak of the scandalous life of Whitehall, he thought of Charles sitting in his closet and looking at the portrait of his father. To John there was always a reason in the seeming unreason of all this wanton fooling. The City burning, and the King toying with Castlemaine. The Dutch in the river, and Charles hunting a moth in his mistress's bedroom! And in the end, London ruled by the King's creatures! Had not the man who had stepped from the window of the Banqueting Hall on that January day been most signally avenged?

In the shifting sunlight of an April morning John saw the Paradell coach standing in the great avenue with a little crowd of gentlemen about it, and among them Hargreaves, conspicuous by his broad, bold face and the arro-

gant throwing-back of his head. Fairfax went near enough to see Luce and her mother holding a little court under the green buds of the trees. Hargreaves stood in the midst of it all like a master of the ceremonies, seeing that these gentlemen were properly dazzled and wholly obsequious.

They were his toadies, and had been drilled like a little stage-crowd in the expression of their admiration and their homage. Did not Circe change men into beasts, and here was a Circe who changed beasts into men. Never was there a more docile and dazzled world of gallants.

"Men are conquered so easily."

My Lady laughed.

Someone hummed the song :

"Beauty, advance. Our hearts are at your feet."

The great man shone among his satellites, using his wit upon them, and making them skip out of his way like dogs. The illusion was to be perpetuated, the illusion that was so pleasing to the young madam in the coach. She was supreme ; her beauty was autocratic and queenly ; she had but to lift a finger and men fell down and grovelled. Her power over them was miraculous, unchallenged. The male beast could do nothing but what she willed him to do while he remained under her enchanting eyes.

Fairfax felt all this, even at a distance, and it saddened him.

"They will intoxicate her with flattery," he thought ; "could any young girl's heart or head withstand it ? If one had but a mirror to show her the real souls of these men !"

He watched Hargreaves enter the coach and drive away with the ladies, leaving the stage-crowd to break loose like a lot of boys. Fairfax felt ready to fight the whole mob, but he knew that his quarrel was with their master of the ceremonies. As he walked back across the park he met old Pagan fresh from the country.

"What, still haunting the graves of the mighty ?"

Fairfax understood the question in his eyes.

"You think me shameless or mad ?"

"I would not insult my affection for you, John, by thinking any such nonsense. Every wise man has his reasons."

Fairfax turned and walked awhile with him under the trees.

"You think this place is dangerous for me, sir?"

"It depends upon yourself, John."

"I am not the romantic fool I was two years ago. For six months I have been fencing two hours a day with a master of the game, who is also my friend, the Chevalier de Marsac."

"Marsac the Frenchman?"

"Yes."

"Then you have learnt your lesson that a man must go armed, for men will always be fighting, if not with swords then with some other weapon. The man who is not armed is the sport of rogues."

They strolled together for an hour, Fairfax discovering to the old cavalier some of the points of his new philosophy.

"I have found," he said, "that if there is danger on the road, it behoves a man to go out and take it boldly by the throat. When faced it ceases to be terrible. I live now to please something in myself, a light that will not be hidden, a mirror that shows the shadow of any little meanness. Keep troth with thyself. That is how I see life."

"It is the gentleman's religion, John, which is often better than the religion of the Christian. All gentlemen are Christians, but not all Christians are gentlemen. Ask the Devil."

When Fairfax returned to Gold Hammer Court he found a lackey outside Marsac's door with a paper in his hand. He had been waiting there an hour.

"Mr. Fairfax?"

"Yes, what do you want with me?"

The lackey had been ready for insolence, but there was something in John's eyes that forbade it.

"My orders are to deliver this letter into your hands, sir."

"Who sends it?"

"Sir Teg Hargreaves."

Fairfax took the letter.

"I had no orders to wait, sir."

"Very good. You can go."

He climbed the stairs to his own room, and, standing by the window, broke the wax with which the paper had been sealed.

"SIR,—I cannot bring myself to quarrel with a man who ran away from me two years ago, nor with a gentleman who is Miss Paradell's guardian. But I hear that you have done me the disservice of traducing my honour to this lady, and I beg to warn you that if this insolence is repeated I shall have you so soundly cudgelled in some public street that you will not need a seat on the back of an ass.

"Keep this in your private pocket, and do not run and whimper to women.

HARGREAVES."

Fairfax refolded the letter, and stood for some time by the window looking down into the old grey court whose roof was the thin blue of the April sky. This insolent message left him cold. He saw the hand of my Lady in it and not the malice of Luce. It was a blunt challenge, a declaration of war, but Fairfax was not to be drawn from his steady march towards the light beyond the hills. Let this man despise him. This very scorn seemed to make Hargreaves less formidable, an enemy whom it might be possible to surprise.

But if that letter left Fairfax cold it blew Marsac into a white heat. Fairfax showed it to him, and told him the whole tale.

"This is where I pay my debt," said the Frenchman ;
"I'll fasten a quarrel of my own upon the gentleman."

"You cannot take my quarrel from me."

Marsac was so hot over it that he would have rushed out then and there, but Fairfax held the door.

"Listen, Prosper, you cannot kill this man. They would hang you, unless you got across the sea to France. And what would the world say—that I, a coward, had hired my friend to kill the man I dared not meet? If you love me you will let it be."

Marsac looked at him with steady eyes.

" Yes, by the Lord, it is your quarrel——"

" And I bide my time. Let this fellow despise me and think me a coward. I shall be the more dangerous to him when the day comes."

" You will let this letter pass ? "

" I shall let it pass, because I have a feeling, old friend, that it is an act of courage, an act of courage that may bring me more than either I or you imagine. If I am silent this man will think that he has cowed me. I shall have leisure to watch and to wait."

Marsac shrugged his shoulders.

" But the woman. John ? "

Fairfax's face shone with an almost prophetic light.

" I believe," he said, " that some day she will have need of me. I wait for that day. And I shall be ready."

CHAPTER XXXIX

SO this child of the woodlands was taken from the green deeps of the bracken and the beeches, clothed in satins, perfumed, throned in a coach and made a little painted goddess for men of the world to worship. That her temple was of Hargreaves's building never crossed her mind. There were poets who wrote her odes and sonnets, gentlemen who pretended to languish in her absence and who woke to life only when she played the sun. She was presented at Court, and even won a jealous and critical stare from the indispensable Castlemaine. When she drove in the park a little crowd gathered like wasps round a honey-pot. And this homage, this crawling of male things, pleased her. She saw no reason to doubt the sincerity of her triumph, for her mirror was in league with Sir Theophilus Egmond Hargreaves.

In playing to Luce's conception of herself Teg Hargreaves showed a shrewdness that survived his infatuation, for infatuated he was, to the astonishment of all men who knew his present and his past. He had had many affairs, but they had helped rather than hindered towards his march to power. In his passion for this country girl he was inflamed by her virginity, her pride, her lithe, wild innocence. She was like a rare, bright morning in the spring, with a little white frost still lying upon the grass. She had what these fashionable women lacked—mystery, the thrill of innocence, a reticence that could hide a secret. She held men at arm's length. She was not a coquette. There was something in her that a worldling like Hargreaves would never understand, and yet he felt the spell of it. The spiritual part of her was hidden away, a lamp behind the locked door of an oratory, and this carnal man was ready to commit sacrilege, break in, and possess that which no fleshly hands could hold.

He had eliminated Fairfax—at least, he believed so. The coward would acquiesce, and he knew that Luce had heard of John's silence through her mother. He thought that she could not misread it, and yet she read into John's seeming cowardice a courage and a purpose that Hargreaves did not suspect.

"You need not trouble your head about John. Sir Teg has brought him to heel."

That was how my Lady announced it, but Luce sensed a mystery.

"You mean that John has consented?"

"My dear, I thought it right that our gentleman should know that John was his enemy. He sent John a message—a message that no man of pride could swallow, but our Puritan swallowed it."

"You accuse him of cowardice?"

"His own silence proves it. Has he dared to show his face here? Sir Teg has him at heel like a cowed dog."

Yet Luce did not believe it. Her incredulity was a something in herself, partly mysterious, partly logical. It was there, it existed, like a veiled statue in a sanctuary. She remembered Fairfax's life during the plague, how he had saved Marsac, how he had seemed ready to sacrifice himself in proving the truth. Would he be afraid of the threat of a man's sword?

She was a little baffled, but out of her very bafflement came a ray of spiritual intuition. Fairfax had put himself outside the gate, but he waited there, on guard. He was not to be taunted into action by the insolence of Hargreaves or the malice of her mother.

"He will do nothing," she thought, "unless I call to him. But he is there."

It is possible that Luce did not realize how much John Fairfax was behind her during the days of her initiation. He was there, a near presence, something that could be called on in a case of need. He was at the back of much of her confidence and her pride. Her faith in Fairfax was subconscious; danger and anguish had not called it forth into a glare of conscious light. She had grasped neither its significance nor her own ingratitude,

for she was still so much a child, unthinkingly taking, not awake to the divine necessity of giving. She had begun to think of John with a little, pleasant tenderness. He was a hand, a countenance, a pair of steady eyes. But as yet she did not understand.

During those April days she did not see John Fairfax, but Fairfax saw her. He would be under some tree in the park, watching her drive by with my Lady in the Paradell coach. If she went shopping with her maid and a tall lackey at her heels, Fairfax was not very far away. He made King Street a cloister-walk at night, and love looked up at her window. When he was not watching her, he was never very far from his lodging in Gold Hammer Court, for he had a strange premonition that some day she would send for him in the hour of her need. He was like a soldier sleeping in his clothes with his arms beside him, ready to march at dawn to the attack.

Luce's attitude towards Hargreaves was far more problematical than her unconscious faith in John. She was both repelled by the man and attracted by him, but the very fierceness of the attraction frightened her. There seemed to be some physical force in the man that drew her towards the imagining of a masterful embrace. She admired his strength, his rising power, and thought herself invulnerable and supreme, the very queen of all his forcefulness. He seemed discreet, tender, even gentle, and yet she was a little bewildered.

"Is this love?"

For Hargreaves was like wine to a young girl who had never touched it. Luce was in a little fever of triumphant exultation, and it seemed to her that Hargreaves was the master of the world that flattered her and offered her flowers. There were moments when she thought she loved him; other moments when she stood aside like a shy child and looked at him with eyes that asked, "What art thou?" And in her ears sounded the panegyrics sung by her mother.

"A very notable and gallant gentleman who knows how to love, child. They say that in five years he will be one of the most powerful men in the country. He

is in the inner council at Court. Many a woman would give more than her head to marry him.'"

Yet Luce's revelation of herself to herself came to her suddenly, and with it a sudden intimate knowledge of the mystery of her own heart. Something in Hargreaves was revealed. The body of him became clay.

My Lady had left them alone together by the window of the withdrawing-room, Luce in a high-backed chair covered with red brocade, Hargreaves behind her, leaning one elbow on the carved back. He had been talking to her with playful gallantry, very near to her and yet very far away. His presence was no more than a breeze in the trees. She listened, conscious of a pleasant atmosphere of homage, rather liking the man in his attitude of devotion.

And suddenly he touched her, and in a certain studied way. His hand had touched hers when he had danced with her, or when he had handed her into her coach, but such contact had been formal, almost impersonal. But now his hand had come from behind the chair and grasped her shoulder, pinching up the skin between thumb and forefinger. She glanced round and saw his big knuckles and the reddish hair on the back of his hand and wrist.

"Do not touch me, please."

She freed her shoulder with a quick movement of the body.

He bent over her, smiling, his blue eyes staring down into her face.

"I ask you not to touch me; that is all," she said, cold as death.

For something had happened. Contact—that intimate touch of his—had dissipated the peculiar physical attraction he had had for her. It seemed to flow away and lose itself in space like some magnetic fluid. She glanced again at his hands and saw hair, skin, flesh, a strength that had suddenly become mysteriously repulsive. She looked at his square and stubborn head, his vivid blue eyes, his mouth, and felt that she could never bear to be loved by him.

Hargreaves smiled through his impatience.

"You are as wild as a bird," he said.

She moved to the cushioned seat in the window.

"I do not like being touched."²

"You will soon grow used to it," was his thought.

He bowed over the back of the chair.

"The queen has spoken."

He seemed contrite, distressed, but for the first time she had a feeling that he was mocking her, that something very cunning and very strong watched from behind his unflinching and shallow eyes.

When Hargreaves had left she went to her room, and shut herself in with a sudden sense of loneliness, and a distaste for her mother's company. She felt tired, distraught, as though some life force had been taken from her. She drooped, and, looking in her mirror, discovered a sudden distrust of her own face and of the new world in which she moved. What did she know of men or of life, or of the love of a man for a woman? What was she asking of life? Adventure, homage, colour, clothes, sweetmeats, the excitement of being hunted, followed, the sweeping of men's hats, the little flatteries, the feminine triumphs? Whither did it all lead? What would such a man as Hargreaves ask of her? What had Bellasis asked of her?

That she should give herself to a man as a plaything, a mere body, a pot of honey—nothing more than that! The other part of her, the Luce whom Philip Paradell had loved, lifted its head with sudden fastidious scorn. Was not John Fairfax right? She had felt that he was right directly Hargreaves's hand had touched her.

She sat there till dusk came, watching the sky beyond the housetops and the tracery of the trees. The west was a grey opal with shimmerings of crimson and green. She heard birds singing in a garden. Someone had knocked at her door.

"Yes?"²²

"Are you not coming to supper, Miss Luce? My Lady is waiting."

"I am going to bed, Nance. I shall not want you. Tell my Lady that I have a headache."²

"May I bring you something to eat, Miss Luce?"²²

"I am not hungry. Tell them I do not wish to be disturbed."

She sat on at the open window, with the room in darkness. Presently the moon rose, and she saw its light on the roofs and the branches of the trees. There was something very beautiful and soothing in this moonlight, but her loneliness remained. She felt like a disgraced child shut up in a room, vaguely afraid, asking to be comforted.

The street was very silent—a broad, black cleft below her window, unlit by the moon. She heard someone pass slowly along it, and the footsteps were the footsteps of a man. They died away, grew again, returned under her window, and kept on passing and re-passing. There was a steadfastness, a patience in the sound that provoked her attention. These footsteps were the steady, faithful beating of a friendly heart. Luce, like a child waking from some night terror, felt that she could need some such stray heart beating against hers.

She leant forward and looked out. It was too dark for her to see the man save as a dim figure walking to and fro. He was here with a purpose, and of a sudden her lips and tongue shaped themselves to the word, "John."

Of course. She knew it instantly. She remembered that she had heard those steps before, and had set no meaning to them. She felt at her throat, unclasped a little pendant of amethysts set in heavy silver, and waited for his footsteps to come below her window. So sure was she that the man below was Fairfax that she dropped her message into the darkness with the faith of a child who knows that a pebble will strike water in a well.

She heard a little metallic sound, and a sudden silence. The man had stopped below her window. He was searching for the thing that had fallen out of heaven.

She leant out.

"John."

His voice came back to her.

"Luce, how did you know?"

"I knew," she answered; "I just knew."

She could see the dim whiteness of his face. He had the pendant in the palm of his right hand.

" Was this for me ? "

" Yes."

" God bless you," he said.

She was smiling, clasping herself with her arms.

" It is good to feel that you are there, John."

" I am always here, Luce—if you should want me."

" Do not go far away from me," she said.

CHAPTER XL

IN a little while Teg Hargreaves began to grow restless. Luce seemed to have stepped back into the shade and to stand like a girl on the edge of a wood looking at him with eyes of vague distrust, ready to fly and hide herself among the trees. Hargreaves had but one attitude towards woman, and he had varied it by humouring this child whose beauty had infatuated him. He did not trouble his head about the feminine soul, and when Luce showed herself moody and distant he reverted to his natural attitude.

"The jade does not know her own mind. It is a man's business to make her know it. After all, it is an impertinence that a woman should have a mind. She is a body, for the creating of other bodies. Give woman the one great sensation and she will ask for nothing else."

That was Hargreaves's honest opinion, the opinion of a very passionate man who had had many experiences, and who was a materialist and a cynic. He was as sincere as the pig who was heard to swear that "There is nothing like swill." For Hargreaves there was no Flame Invisible.

He spoke with perfect frankness to Luce's mother, and found in her an affectionate and almost sentimental accomplice. Catharine Paradell had her own philosophy and an equal contempt for her own sex.

"I have played the peacock long enough," he told her; "the girl is growing whimsical. It is time she was put to bed."

My Lady led him to a seat at the end of the garden where the yew hedge hid them from the house. Her eyes were arch and malicious.

"My dear man, I agree with you. Man was created so that woman might do without a mind. The great thing is to give a girl a reason for marrying."

"Love," he said with a laugh. "All the baby talk!"

"Fudge! I ask you how many women know what love is when they marry? Not one in ten. And many of them are frightened to death—or so healthily pleased with the new sensation——"

"So Luce needs a reason?"

"Exactly. A man of resource supplies it. I give you my countenance in the business because I wish Luce married to you rather than to that melancholy fool."

Hargreaves looked her in the eyes.

"Then I can count on you?"

"Certainly."

"And if I frighten the girl a little?"

"You will know how to console her. She is healthy and less cold than she thinks. If you will promise not to be rough—too outrageous."

"My dear lady, I am much softer-hearted than you are. I shall play a part, but I shall be the devout—if masterful—lover. A month hence she will be laughing her eyes out. I know something about women."

Their glances met, and each realized that the other was sneering, but what did a sneer matter? They were accomplices, equally guilty, part of the same brutally complacent world.

It was a day in May, a day that was memorable to Luce as her father's birthday, when my Lady ordered the coach somewhat later than usual, and taking Luce with her, drove to the park. The weather was exquisite and the world a reflection of the weather. The thin film of green hung like a curtain against a virgin sky. All the world seemed out in the sun, and the sides were full of coaches and chairs. Great ladies descended in all the frail mystery of their summer clothes and deigned to walk the earth for the delectation of man. Little parties had formed themselves under the trees of this seemingly innocent Arcady. There was one party in particular that caught Luce's eyes, a group of men and women gathered round a bold and splendidly handsome wench who sat singing, with her scarlet petticoats spread out, while a man accompanied her on the guitar. She had the voice of an angel, but when the man who twanged

the guitar fumbled the measure she broke off and cursed him, damning his eyes and wishing him in the foulest company.

The coach drove on.

"Who is that woman?"

"La, child, some actress. She has learnt how to talk to men."

"How horrible!" said the daughter.

Another coach joined theirs. Greetings and counter-greetings, with the two coaches side by side, and Hargreaves making known an extraordinary old woman who drove with him in his coach. She had grey corkscrew curls, a huge nose, and a pair of wicked old eyes. Aunt Octavia leant out, chatted to my Lady, and made eyes at Luce. Hargreaves and the two women were very merry. Luce looked grave and held her tongue.

"My dear, I must come in and talk to you. We will change partners. Help me out, Teg."

He laughed.

"Then I must have Luce."

They were so gay over the exchange that Luce thought little of it, and let Aunt Octavia take her place. She suffered Hargreaves to hand her into 'is coach, for she had been preparing herself for the moment when she would lay a cold and virginal hand upon his passion. Luce was never a coward. She knew that something had to be said by him, and she was ready to tell him the truth. And that, she thought in her innocence, would be the end of it.

She drove out of the park in Hargreaves's coach, her mother having given the signal for home, it being her obvious intention to take Aunt Octavia to King Street. Luce and Hargreaves followed, and in listening to him she did not notice that they were taking a different road from the one by which they had entered the park. Hargreaves was talking to her as he had never talked before, and she was interested and quite unafraid of him. He was confessing his ambition, and proving to her how easy it was for a determined man to shoulder his way to power when the country was in the hands of fops and gamblers.

A certain playfulness in his mood softened the harsher

outlines of his confession. Luce had never liked him so well, though he had lost that peculiar glamour that had dazzled her in the beginning. He seemed more of the man and less of the debonair gentleman of fashion.

"So you think of nothing but power?"

He smiled at her rather strangely.

"I think of many other things. For instance, you would never suspect me of being a gardener."

She laughed.

"No."

"I have one of the finest gardens on the outskirts of Westminster. To be sure, I can prove it to you. We shall pass close to my garden. Tom."

He leant out and spoke to the coachman.

"Take Cherry-tree Lane on your way to King Street."

"Yes, sir."

Luce did not protest. There was no fear in her that thought of protesting.

They drove through a maze of lanes between orchards and gardens, with fruit blossom showing against the blue, and birds singing to the sunset. The coach turned into Cherry-tree Lane and stopped half-way down it. On one side Luce saw a hedge, freshly green and all splashed with sunlight; on the other, an old high red brick wall with a gate opening under an arch. An iron bell-handle showed beside the gate. The footman sprang down from his perch behind the coach, and rang the gate-bell.

Hargreaves handed her out.

"You shall see my cherry trees," he said, "and my tulips."

A gardener had opened the gate, and she passed through with Hargreaves into the garden. All around it, and hiding the brick wall, stood rows of old cherries like white clouds against the blue of the sky. The centre space was spread with a mass of crimson tulips and white narcissi, half in the light, half in the shadow. A paved walk led to a sundial. Beyond it stood four clipped yews, and beyond the yews an old red brick garden-house raised a gilded cupola and wind-vane against the sky. The house had a little white portico and white window-frames, and its south wall was covered by a vine.

"Here is my sanctuary in Cherry-tree Lane. I make you free of it."

He bowed, smiling, gracious and playful.

"What a sweet place!"

"And the tulips are Dutch, in spite of our quarrel with the Dutchmen. Come and see my Arcadian library."

She did not notice that the gate had been shut and locked, and that the gardener had taken the key. They walked up the paved path to the garden-house, and they had reached the portico when Luce heard the sound of wheels in the lane.

Her eyes showed a momentary flicker of uneasiness.

"Is that——"

"They are turning the coach. The other end of the lane is blind."

An old woman stood in the doorway, curtsying, a most clean and seductive old woman with a mild pink face, a lace cap, and a double chin. She smiled. Her flounced petticoat and red stays seemed to cover a world of motherliness and fat innocence.

"Good evening, your ladyship! Good evening, sir!"

"Well, Mother Moll, show Miss Luce the house. And if you have some of that famous cherry wine of yours ready——"

He turned aside, laughing, and went back down the path, as though to speak to the gardener. Mrs. Moll was curtsying and radiating motherliness.

"Step in, my lady! I will show you the house. La, but I take some pride in it."

Luce entered the house, finding herself in a little parlour paved after the Dutch fashion with big blue-and-white tiles. It was a pleasant room, its table, court-cupboard and chairs of oak, with a cushioned settle at the window, its walls painted in imitation of a balcony covered with roses. Luce noticed that a place was laid at the table with some fine old silver and Venetian glass. Mother Moll curtsied her through the parlour to a bedroom that opened from it, and the first thing that surprised Luce was the bed. The coverlet was turned back, showing

clean sheets and pillows—a bed that had been made ready and waited for someone.

The room made her vaguely uneasy. She glanced round it, noticed a vase full of flowers on the table by the window, and turned towards the door. The old woman bobbed to her.

“ I hope my Lady likes her quarters ? ”

Luce looked in astonishment at the sly and smiling face.

“ What do you mean ? I came in with your master to see the garden.”

“ La, my dear, but I was told you would be staying.”

Luce went very white. She walked quickly past Mother Moll, across the parlour and towards the door. She was conscious of a wild desire to escape from the house, to find herself in the garden, in the lane. When she reached the doorway she found Hargreaves standing under the portico with his back towards her. He turned, looked at her steadily and smiled.

“ Well, does it please you ? ”

She was frightened. He seemed to stand there at the door of a cage.

“ I am going home,” she said ; “ they will be wondering.”

Hargreaves did not move.

“ Dear heart—but this is home.”

She stood looking at him with wide eyes, her face and throat white as the cherry blossom, her breath coming quickly.

“ What do you mean ? ”

He bowed to her.

“ My little lady, I love you so much that I shall keep you here until you consent to marry me.”

“ You would not dare,” she said.

He looked her steadily in the eyes with a brutal yet gallant good humour.

“ I have dared. Your mother is in the plot. I will give you three days.”

She stepped back slowly into the room, and, looking round her, saw that she was alone. Mother Moll had disappeared. And suddenly she understood it all—the trick in the park, the high brick wall, the place laid at

the table, the bed. The colour came back to her face. The treachery of it all filled her with a flaming and generous anger, an anger that waved defiance.

"You beast!" she said.

He laughed.

"Ugly names will not mend matters. If you scream, my dear, you will be locked in the house. In a month, I swear, you will have forgiven me."

"Why?" she flashed at him.

"Because I shall have taught you what love is."

From that moment she knew what manner of man he was. The great revulsion was upon her.

"That would be impossible—so impossible that you will let me pass."

He spread his arms, and stood with his hands resting against the posts of the door.

"We are agreed," he said, "that you do not know your own mind. That is a woman's privilege; and my privilege is to make up your mind for you. I shall do it in three days. Either you go out of this house as my wife, or you go out of it as a woman with no reputation. That may sound brutal, but I believe women like men to be brutal. Now come and kiss me good night."

She turned and sat down on one of the oak chairs, and her face was like the face of a girl who has been ravished.

"Now I know that John Fairfax was right," she said.

CHAPTER XLI

IN the dusk of the evening John Fairfax walked under Luce's window, but though her window was dark the lover in him remained happy and undisturbed. Few nights had passed without his devotion receiving its blessing—some little message, a wave of the hand, a shadow against the curtain, or a glimpse of her face; but to-night her window was empty, and the moon did not rise. There were lights in the other windows, and he could hear the sound of voices within.

"They have friends with them," he thought, "and they sit up late. I shall not see her to-night."

He stood awhile looking at the stars, not guessing that Luce was looking at those same stars, a Luce who would neither touch food nor go to bed, but a Luce who sat on the settle by the window, her arms resting on the window-ledge, and her chin resting on her arms. She watched the stars, and the path that led to the white portico, and the dim blossom on the cherry trees. She was in a cage, watched by a man and a woman whom she had found unbribable and cynically sympathetic in their sentimental corruption.

"Don't 'ee take it to heart, my dear. Sir Teg was always a masterful man, but he'll make a fine, gallant husband."

Luce's incredulity was as strange as her lover's tranquil devotion. No man would dare to persist in such a piece of tragic treachery. It was unthinkable. To-morrow, in the calm and sane light of the morning, she would speak with Hargreaves and convince him of her sincerity, and he would open the door and let her go. She would send for John instantly, tell him the truth, and forbid him to quarrel with Hargreaves. She had begun to be desperately afraid of a quarrel, and her heart's fear was for Fairfax.

"I will refuse him everything," she thought, "unless he promises not to quarrel."

And so, sitting at that window, shocked but not

dismayed, she made her innocent plans, still thinking that she could tame the passions and the wrath of men, and that she had but to smile and they would obey her. Her thoughts were of John Fairfax, little tremulous thoughts that quivered with a new wonder and a new tenderness. They would go away together to the country. These few hours in this house among the cherry trees had filled her with a horror of these people of fashion.

About midnight she went into the inner room, and lay down dressed on the bed. The stress of her emotions had tired her, and she fell asleep. And about the same hour Sir Teg Hargreaves came out of her mother's house, and went his way along King Street. Fairfax was still watching, standing under a clump of lilacs in a garden across the way. Hargreaves did not see him, but John recognized Hargreaves by the swing of his shoulders and that spring of the heel as he walked. He followed the man, saw Hargreaves go to his own house, and then walked to his own lodging.

Luce's dark window puzzled him a little.

"Perhaps she was tired," he thought, "and had gone to bed early."

Even his love could not see that girl lying in her clothes on that bed in the garden-house, one hand under her face, the starlight glinting through the window on the silver buckles of her shoes.

Luce woke early, and the sun was shining in at the window. She had a moment of terror, but sitting on the bed she saw the blue sky, the white blossom of the cherry trees, the red and white of the tulips and narcissi, and the calm of the morning reassured her. The freshness and the smell of the garden were the friends of her innocence. How could anything violent or brutal happen in such a place? She sat down before the mirror and did her hair, listening to the birds singing, and catching glimpses of the gardener at work. She put on her hat and went into the parlour. Mother Moll had left the food on the table, and Luce sat down and ate.

The old woman found her in this wholesome and confident mood, spreading cream and a conserve of fruit on a slice of white bread.

"Why, bless us, that's better."

It is so easy to be deceived by the bluff vitality of the world's animal good-humour, and this pink and white old lady looked as unsinister as cherry blossom.

"When will Sir Teg Hargreaves be here?"

"What, in such a hurry to see your gentleman?"

Luce did not confide in Mother Moll, but in imagination she saw the gate open and Hargreaves, chagrined and remorseful, bowing her into the lane.

"How far are we from King Street?"

"Bless me if I know, my dear. Sir Teg will tell you when he comes."

When she had finished her meal, Luce went out and walked in the garden. The gardener was hoeing weeds, a quiet and harmless-looking man with a brown beard and mild eyes. He touched his hat to Luce, and she saw that he watched her. She had tried to bribe him the night before, and he had pretended to be deaf.

She picked a handful of narcissi.

"In an hour or two hours I shall be at home," she thought, "and I shall send for John."

But it happened otherwise. An hour later she was sitting on a chair that had been brought out for her, looking with an angry and helpless dismay at the man who leant against the sundial. He had laughed at her demands. He seemed in a very good temper. He did not threaten or scold, but his playfulness frightened her more than threats. He was so unserious, yet so utterly immovable. She could not believe that he was in earnest, and she still struggled.

"But I do not love you," she said, with the incredulous eyes of a child.

"I shall alter that."

He stared at her all the while with a kind of hungry complacency, but he did not attempt to touch her.

"You cannot alter it."

"We shall see."

And suddenly she became that primitive thing, the woman who realizes the rawness of life and the uses of cunning.

"Suppose I agree to marry you?"

"I will send for a parson, and your mother—if you wish her to bless us."

"I would rather be married at home."

He burst out laughing, and snapped his fingers at her.

"Oh, Eve, Eve! I am not to be fooled with an apple. We will be married here, and nowhere else."

"Then I shall not marry you."

"Why, then we are where we were before. That little trick would not work."

She tried to conceal her anger and her fear, and to shrug her shoulders at him.

"You are very absurd. Of course, I shall not marry you."

"You will," he said, coming within a pace of her and looking down at her with no laughter in his eyes.

From that moment she knew that he was in earnest, that his madness was the most merciless sanity, that he was not to be repulsed by any weapon that she could use. She felt naked, helpless, without words that carried any meaning, almost without a voice. She began to be greatly afraid. She hated him now with a hatred that saw itself on the edge of servility and tears. Her pride touched this unthinkable humiliation and recoiled in anguish.

When Hargreaves left her, after speaking to his creatures, she tried to bribe them to open the gate. She failed. The man turned on her almost savagely. His mild eyes were secretly afraid.

"Devil take you," he said; "don't come snivelling to me." She flashed out at him.

"You are as bad as your master."

He spat on the ground.

"That's what I am—spittle. We wretches can't afford to have consciences. Get out."

She wandered round the garden, hoping to discover some place where the limb of a tree would give her a chance of reaching the top of the wall, for she could climb like a boy; but everywhere she found a strip of blue sky between the white blossoms and the red brickwork. She began to drift towards a panic mood, and, going to the gate, stood there listening for the sound of footsteps in the lane. She would call to anyone who passed.

But the man had been watching her, and he came trampling across the tulip beds with the exasperated face of a gardener chasing some thieving boy.

"No, you don't, my lady. Into the house with you."

"I shall go where I choose."

"You will walk into the house," he said, "or, damn me, I'll carry you. And you'll stay there."

She shrank from the humiliation of any scuffle with this man, and, walking back past the sun-dial, entered the garden-house. But her heart was crying out in her now with the wild appeal of a frightened child, "John—John—Oh, come to me!"

She sat down by the window, and tried to bring herself to a calm envisagement of her condition. Her heart was beating hard and fast, exaggerating that sense of breathlessness that comes with uncontrollable fear. Her mouth felt dry. She found it difficult to sit still and listen to the old woman moving about in the kitchen.

If she wrote a letter to John, would this old woman take a bribe and help her to get it into Fairfax's hands? Or she might write a letter to him and try to throw it over the wall into the lane. "In the name of God—take this to Mr. Fairfax, of Gold Hammer Court." The appeal might carry, and some passer-by decide to meddle in the adventure.

The impulse of fear had made her stretch out her hands to this man whose life had been so full of sadness. She might call to him and he would come. And then?

She sat staring at the opposite wall as though it were a screen showing her a sudden and vivid picture of what would happen. If John Fairfax came to rescue her, would not Hargreaves kill him? She saw swords drawn and two men fighting in the quiet garden. One of the men fell, and the man who fell was John.

She stood up, trembling, groping with her hands, moved by a sudden great tenderness.

How could she send for John Fairfax, when her sending for him might bring him to his death? Hargreaves was a notorious duellist; she had heard him boast of it; he would hold John Fairfax at his mercy.

Looking out of the window, she saw the tulips the colour of blood, and her eyes filled with tears. Yes; that is what would happen: she saw it so plainly, and with an anguish that refused to be deceived.

CHAPTER XLII

FOR two days this mood held, but on the morning of the third day fear broke its leash and Luce crouched in a dark corner of her consciousness, looking with eyes of terror at her own fear. She now knew the alternatives that were offered to her: mistress or wife! She would have to choose.

Hargreaves found her sitting on one of the high, cane-backed chairs, looking sullen and almost furtive. She knew that she was about to do a thing that the soul of her scorned and hated. She was ready to lie and twist and use her cunning in order to escape, to hide behind the man who loved her, to use his love as a body between her and her enemy. She did not recognize the essential and primitive naturalness of her attitude. Life had been artificial, a pleasant and protected drift along a peaceful highway. She had not studied the raw elements as Fairfax had studied them, nor did she guess that he had prepared himself to face the savagery that is at the heart of all civilization, cover it with sentiment as we will. Luce wanted to remain sentimental when two savage men were contending for the possession of her. Fairfax could have told her that sentiment was no more than a flimsy bedgown, and that in the last phase only the man's strength mattered.

Hargreaves looked at her with debonair good humour.

"Well, Mistress Luce, have you decided?"

She avoided his eyes.

"There is one thing that you have forgotten," she said.

"What is it?"

"My guardian."

"Mr. John Fairfax?"

"Yes. His consent is necessary, and he will never consent."

She was surprised when he caught her up.

"If he consents will you marry me?"

Her face became a mask.

"I will—if——"

"I understand your duplicity, my dear. You wish to make terms. You say: 'Let Mr. Fairfax come here. Let me hear him give his consent, then I will marry you.' Is that it?"

She nodded.

"Very well; he shall come."

She was astonished, but in an instant she understood what was in his mind. They were gambling against each other on John Fairfax's courage, and Hargreaves believed him a coward. She sat rigid, staring, fingering the lace on her bosom.

Hargreaves had called the woman.

"Paper, an ink-horn, a quill—and some wax."

The woman brought them and placed them on the table. Hargreaves looked at Luce.

"You shall write him a letter, but you will pardon me if I help to dictate it."

He placed a chair for her at the table.

"Now, will you write?"

She hesitated. Her eyes had a clouded, shamed look. She felt that she might be writing John Fairfax's death warrant.

"You will promise to send it?"

"Of course."

"And wait? He may be out of London."

"I happen to know where he is to be found."

Suddenly she surrendered, and her impatience was significant. She felt that she could bear no more suspense, that she would complete this one act and then lie down and leave herself in the hands of these men.

She was very weary, and weariness dulls the fine edge of the will.

"I will write."

She sat down at the table. Hargreaves pushed the

writing materials towards her, and then placed himself behind her chair.

"Begin," he said; "I will dictate."

She glanced round with tired and sullen eyes.

"Am I to have no say?"

"Certainly—are you not writing the letter?"

She dipped the quill in the ink-horn and began to write.

"Dear John——"

She paused, waiting.

"Well?"

"Say this: 'The bearer will hand you this letter and will wait to act as your guide. I wish to consult you on the question of my marriage to Sir Teg Hargreaves, and to hear you give your consent. The matter is very urgent and I would have you come to me at once. Come alone, and tell no one.'"

She wrote it, and then broke into a last passionate protest.

"It is like setting a trap. You wish to entice him here?"

He was leaning over her shoulder, reading what she had written.

"Nothing will happen to Mr. Fairfax—unless——"

"Unless he refuses his consent?"

"Exactly."

"You devil!" she said.

He patted her shoulder.

"Calm yourself. He will consent. Now sign it——"

She signed it, and bursting into a passion of tears, ran into the inner room and threw herself on the bed.

Hargreaves added a few words of his own to the letter, sealed it, and, going out into the garden, called the man to him.

"Tom, do you know Gold Hammer Court, off the Strand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Take this letter to Mr. John Fairfax, who lodges in the house of one Marsac—a Frenchman. Deliver this letter into no hands but those of Mr. Fairfax, and wait to guide him here. Answer no questions; be deaf. You understand?"

The man nodded.

On this very morning John Fairfax had called at the

Paradells' house and asked to see my Lady. For three nights he had seen no light in Luce's window; she had become invisible, and he was troubled. Catharine Paradell received him with the apparent frankness of a woman who had nothing to hide. She was in great good humour, nursing a spaniel puppy in her lap, and Fairfax noticed that her hair had been dyed, and that her lips were very red.

She rallied him on his absence.

"We never see you, John. I am beginning to think that you are a gay and wicked man."

"Perhaps I am learning wisdom."

He met and foiled her gaiety with a light and cynical good humour.

"Wisdom! What is wisdom?"

"That half our moral platitudes are sheer foolishness. The dissipated man is the favoured of God."

She looked at him sharply.

"You have discovered that? Is such worldly philosophy becoming in my daughter's protector?"

"It may make me a more shrewd and capable guardian. Is Luce at home?"

He asked the question casually, so casually that he deceived her.

"No."

"It does not matter."

"You see us so little, John, that you hear no news. Luce is at Barnet, staying with her godmother, Stella St. Leger."

"Is that so?" he said; "may she enjoy herself?"

He stayed talking for a while, and then took leave of my Lady, still troubled by Luce's absence, yet unable to give any reason for his disquietude. He did not suspect my Lady of lying to him, and he knew Mrs. St. Leger had a house at Barnet. Perhaps it was no more than the natural restlessness of the lover, of the lover who had begun to hope.

On returning to Gold Hammer Court he found Marsac leaning out of his window.

"There is an odd fish here, John, with a letter for you."

Fairfax mounted the stairs. Hargreaves's messenger

was sitting on an oak stool at the top of the stairs, his back against the wall, and his feet tucked away under the stool. He looked at Fairfax with his sulkily mild blue eyes, and taking the letter from his belt, let Fairfax read the name upon it, but kept an earthy thumb and forefinger on the cover.

"I am Mr. Fairfax."

The man shook his head and laid a hand to his left ear.

"I'm deaf, you know."

Fairfax pointed at the name on the cover and then at himself. The fellow seemed satisfied; he surrendered the letter.

Fairfax walked to the landing window, and standing there in the morning sunlight, read Luce Paradell's letter. At first he was shocked by it, and greatly distressed; but when he read it a second time with those words of Hargreaves's below Luce's signature, the shrewd wit in him took control of his man's emotions. Was Luce at Barnet and Hargreaves with her at the house of Stella St. Leger, or had my Lady lied? Had Luce written those words freely and uncompelled? There seemed to him a little plaintive cry for help behind the prosaic phrases. Why did she ask him to come alone, and why this secrecy? And would a man with his wits about him need a guide to the St. Leger's house at Barnet?

His eyes grew grim. The lover in him stood to arms. And suddenly he smiled, the smile of a man who sees.

He turned sharply, pretended to walk to Marsac's door, and just before he reached it, swerved and spoke in a loud voice to the man on the stool.

"You can guide me to Barnet?"

The trick worked. He saw the man's look of surprise, and heard him blurt out half the secret.

"Barnet? She ain't——"

His voice seemed to fall out of him; he became sulkily and awkwardly dumb. Fairfax was looking at the fellow's shoes and stockings, and noticing there was but little dust on them. He had not come from Barnet. Catharine Paradell had lied, and there was a world of significance in that lie.

Fairfax smiled. He signed to the man to wait, and

entered Marsac's room. The Frenchman was polishing his sword.

Fairfax handed him the letter.

"My orders have come," he said very calmly.

Marsac was by the window, looking over the paper into John's face.

"Hargreaves!"

"Yes; he has kidnapped her. That is how I read it. She is helpless, and has pleaded to see me. Hargreaves has consented, because of the mocking devil in him, and because he thinks me a coward."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know. That fellow outside is to act as guide. I shall kill Hargreaves."

Marsac looked at John's face.

"I go with you," he said.

"Prosper, I shall go alone. He will not be afraid to let me in."

Marsac was buckling on his sword.

"Yes; and you may find yourself in a trap. I am coming after you, Jack, if not with you; I shall be there behind you all the while. No, hold your tongue; neither you nor God nor the Devil can keep me from holding you in sight to-day. And it may be that you will bless God for this little silver bodkin of mine."

They held hands, looking each other in the eyes.

"My day has come," said John Fairfax; "the day that I have waited for these two years."

CHAPTER XLIII

WHEN John Fairfax and his guide came to Cherry-tree Lane, Hargreaves was walking in the garden, and it was he who opened the gate to them.

"Mr. Fairfax."

He looked John in the eyes and then bowed, an ironical hand over his heart. He wore yellow, his favourite colour, and a big black periwig that gave a backing of shadow to his hard, fresh-coloured face and vivid eyes. His hatred, if he had ever troubled to hate John Fairfax, was concealed by the grand air of the man of fashion.

"You have wasted no time, Mr. Fairfax."

John could not help looking at him with a sombre and poignant curiosity. What had happened here? Was it possible that Luce loved this man, and that her letter had told him nothing more subtle than the truth? There were secrets to be discovered, secrets that might be afraid to show themselves in the presence of this gentleman in yellow.

"My ward is here?"

"She is here. No, you need not lock that gate, Tom. You expect no interference, Mr. Fairfax?"

"None."

John was looking about him—at the cherry trees, the high brick wall, the beds of tulips, the little garden-house. He was wondering whether this place was a cage, or a pleasance where two lovers had enjoyed intimate and tragic embraces. Had Luce given everything, surrendered, and of her own free will? He did not believe it, and a slow but savage anger glowed at the back of his unbelief.

Hargreaves had waved the man away.

"Shall we walk up and down here? I have some advice to give you before you see your ward."

The paved path was six feet wide, and they began to walk to and fro between the gate and the sundial,

each man keeping to his own side of the path. Fairfax was on the alert ; this garden might be a garden of swords and of bludgeons.

"It is better that we should understand each other, Mr. Fairfax."

Hargreaves walked with his shoulders squared, his head up, his blue eyes looking straight before him.

"You are wondering why your ward is here. I will tell you. Women are perverse and contradictory creatures, Mr. Fairfax, and I wished to help your ward to make up her mind. My plan has been so successful that nothing is needed save your consent. She desired me to send for you that you might give it her in person. Being a good-humoured man, I agreed."

As they turned about at the sundial he stared for a moment at Fairfax's face. There was mockery in the look, and more than mockery.

"So everything is smooth and tranquil, for you will not refuse your consent."

Fairfax understood him, and if ever a man felt a spasm of savage and secret exultation, that man was John Fairfax of Shere. So this exquisite Court-bully had sent for him that he might inflict upon him the greatest and most subtle humiliation that one man can inflict upon another. He intended to display him as a coward in the presence of the woman he loved, and as something worse than a coward. It was enough.

They had reached the gate, and here Fairfax paused.

"Then you presume upon my consent?"

"Why, most certainly. You still have a debt of honour that is unpaid. If your consent is not forthcoming, I shall call on you to pay that debt here and immediately."

Their eyes met, and then Fairfax's eyes fell. He half turned aside, looking moodily and almost shamefully at the ground, a man who seemed cowed. He could not deny himself the devilish humour of it, a moment's playing with this man's arrogance. It was he who would lay the ambuscade.

"I see that you have no desire to interfere with me, Mr. Fairfax."

"No, sir. If my ward chooses to marry you——"

"Why—you are the most sensible of men. It is no wish of mine to spoil the career of a worthy country gentleman. Shall we go in?"

When they reached the white portico he bowed John through the doorway with elaborate and polite irony.

"My dear, here is Mr. Fairfax come to bless us."

Luce was sitting on one of the high-backed oak chairs, facing the doorway, and from the moment that her eyes met his Fairfax knew that she loved him. She sat there white and rigid, almost incapable of speech, a child crucified by her own fear, closing her lips over a wild cry of anguish and appeal. John Fairfax was more than a man at that moment. The soul of him seemed to dilate, to become a thousand times more subtle and compassionate, to divine all that this girl was feeling and striving not to feel. He remembered the scene by her father's bed when he had spoken for her and saved her from the ordeal of a tragic confession. He saw that he would have to speak now, utter the words that she both dreaded and yearned to hear him speak.

Hargreaves stood there smiling.

"Mr. Fairfax is our very good friend, sweetheart. Now—if you choose to ask him."

Fairfax saw a kind of blind light in Luce's eyes. Her lips moved, but it was not she who spoke.

"My dear ward, I refuse my consent. Nothing shall persuade me to let this man marry you."

There was a moment's silence. Luce was looking at John. She was bewildered, but through her bewilderment shone the light of the Flame Invisible.

"My dear Mr. Fairfax——"

Hargreaves had stepped forward, bowing.

"Have I misunderstood you?"

Fairfax turned on him with a fierce, white, merciless face.

"Do you misunderstand me?"

He struck Hargreaves in the face with his hat.

They stood staring at each other for a moment, Hargreaves breathing fast and hard, Fairfax in a calm white heat.

"This is the second time, Mr. Fairfax——"

"Out! I will settle with you in the garden."

Then he heard Luce cry out :

“ John—John ! ”

He turned to her for a moment with strange, yet grim gentleness.

“ Stay there.”

She faltered, and obeyed him.

CHAPTER XLIV

THAT gentleman of many adventures, the Chevalier de Marsac, saw all that happened. He had followed his friend, purloined a ladder, and was sitting astride the garden wall, half hidden in a world of cherry blossom, but able to look down into the garden. The gardener had gone to his dinner, and Hargreaves and John Fairfax were far too deeply absorbed in the business of the moment to discover this watcher on the wall.

Hargreaves was a master of the art of duelling. He fought his man from the moment they came upon the ground, and long before their swords had crossed. He fought him through all the punctilious courtesies of the preliminaries ; he fought him when they were taking their places. His method was never to take his eyes from his enemy, to watch him every moment with a smiling insolence, to will the other man to think, " This fellow will kill me." But to-day it was different. Fairfax had ruffled him ; he was savage, in a hurry. He despised his man so much, and felt so sure of killing him, that he gave his anger its head and suffered the beast in him to do as it pleased.

He stripped off his yellow coat and threw it over the sundial.

" This path will serve. You have no quarrel with it ? "

" None," said John, capping the yellow coat with his black one ; " the light is the same for both of us."

Hargreaves gave him a quick look in the face. Fairfax was calm, fatefully calm. Had Hargreaves's head been cooler he might have seen that this man was dangerous.

No more was said. Marsac, shivering like an excited dog, saw them take up their positions, the points of their swords resting on the stones. Fairfax had his back to

Marsac, and the Frenchman could watch Hargreaves's face. It was flushed, strong, and malicious, the face of a man who would fight swiftly, even with rashness, and Marsac's love uttered a little cry of exultation. This angry bully did not know the skill of the man who faced him. He would be careless and passionate, in a savage heat to leave the other man bleeding. Marsac had seen John's face. It was the face of death.

The swords were up, and the blades tingled together. Fairfax had taken the ordinary poise of the day.

"Damn!" thought the Frenchman. "Has he forgotten."

But Fairfax had not forgotten. He was looking Hargreaves in the eyes, smiling a little, watching the other man lose his temper.

It was Hargreaves who attacked, and he attacked to kill. But that flushed face of his was in his sword-play, an angry recklessness that spoilt the subtle edge of his fine skill, and muffled the brilliant precision of that little length of steel. Fairfax held him, keeping a good distance and using his feet.

Marsac watched Hargreaves's face. He saw it grow redder and more staring; the blue stare of the eyes increased. Marsac read him aright. This man was not conscious of surprise, or of the fact that Fairfax was his equal; he was conscious only of delay, bafflement, irritation, the impatience of his own vanity, the absurdity of Fairfax still being on his feet. He did not steady himself, or cease to despise the man in front of him. He grew angrier, and more angrily rash, pushing in savagely to finish the business.

"Now, now!"

Marsac felt himself shouting the words, yet knew that no sound had passed his lips. And then he lay along the wall like a man on a galloping horse, gripping it with his knees and bending low in the saddle. He saw Fairfax change his poise, crouch a little, and close in on Hargreaves, keeping the point of his sword more up and his right hand lower. It was the "*Manière de Marsac*." Fairfax had not forgotten.

Two seconds later Marsac saw Hargreaves stand quite

still, with a look of astonishment upon his face. He had been hit; there was blood on his shirt, a broad red patch that began to streak down towards his breeches. But it was the immense astonishment of the man that made the tragedy dramatic. For a moment he remained there motionless, his arms spread, the point of his sword down, his eyes looking straight at Fairfax.

Then he made an effort to level his sword, took an uncertain step forwards, faltered, opened his mouth wide, and fell where he stood. Fairfax had dealt him that most deadly of Marsac's blows, an upward thrust through the belly-wall and mid-riff to the heart.

Fairfax stood over him, and in turning about, caught sight of what appeared to be some huge bird flapping its wings in the midst of the cherry blossom. It was Marsac, exulting.

"John—John—I taught it you!"

Fairfax left Hargreaves lying there, and walking across the bed of tulips, looked up at Marsac through the branches of the tree. He stood knee-deep in the red flowers, and the blood on the point of the sword was of the same colour. There was anger in his eyes, an anger that had been held below the surface until Hargreaves lay a-sprawl upon the flagstones.

"Explicit!" he said.

Marsac was puzzled. He had seen men excited and emotional at the end of such an affair, laughing and trembling, shocked by the blood upon their swords; but here was John Fairfax, looking grim and fierce, no love-crowned figure of romance breathing happy heroics.

"I could not have done it better myself, John. And now for the shining eyes."

Fairfax turned sharply about, trampling the red flowers.

"Go and wait at the gate for me."

Marsac watched him walk towards the house, take the key from his pocket, and put it in the door. Had John Fairfax fought and killed the great illusion? Had this girl nothing to offer him but a pair of baby's eyes, a soft red mouth, and a mystery that would soon be no more mysterious than a petticoat hanging on a line? Had she the elemental fineness, the passionate strength, the humility,

the courage ? Was she of the flesh that had been torn from the body of the man who loved her ?

Marsac slid down the ladder.

"Some men are too great-hearted," he thought. "Does that wench know what manner of man he is ?"

Fairfax had pushed open the door, and discovered Luce standing there—a Luce whose eyes, mouth, and hands were tremulous, a Luce who looked like some quivering shaft of light in the woodlands on a windy day. Her lips moved and uttered the one word—"John."

Fairfax stood regarding her.

"The man is dead," he said.

He saw her eyes widen. She seemed to become aware of the fierceness in him, and to be bewildered by it. Her hands hung limply. She stared. Her lips moved, but this time no sound came from them.

"You are free," he said ; "you can go home."

In an instant she was on her knees.

"John—I——"

"Get up," he said, "and come and see what a woman's silly pride can do."

He turned about and walked back to where Hargreaves lay by the sundial with the red flower of death over his heart. His blue eyes stared at the sky with the same look of astonishment. Luce followed her lover, but Fairfax seemed hardly aware of her. He bent over Hargreaves, studying the dead man's face almost as though it had a beauty for him—the exquisite beauty of revenge.

Then with a casual and self-absorbed air he took his black coat from the sundial, and laying his sword on Hargreaves's yellow coat, began to turn down the sleeves of his shirt. Luce was watching him, wide-eyed and afraid. She kept her back turned to Hargreaves, quite unable to look at this dead man whose violent hands had been so near her body. Her consciousness was held by the live man who was her lover—this man with the fierce eyes and the mouth of iron.

What had happened to him ? Where was the John Fairfax whom she had known ?

"John !——"

He looked at her steadily, mercilessly ; and suddenly

she went down and clasped his knees, clinging to him with passion.

"John—beat me—kill me—be my master."

She hid her face against him, and he could feel her trembling, and the warm anguish of her young mouth. He seemed intent on buttoning the laced cuff of his shirt, but he was looking at the beautiful outline of her head, so gracious, so humiliated, so gentle. Yes; how easy it was for a woman to overwhelm a man, to seem the soft-haired, angelic child! He conquered her beauty and stood firm.

"Luce," he said, "I have blood on my sword, and how often have you made my heart bleed? It is finished."

She was weeping now, and clinging to him fiercely.

"John, do what you will with me. I'm—I'm broken. Oh, lift me up."

"Back to the pride that plays with a man's soul?"

"No, no; you have conquered my pride."

He stood looking down at her, and suddenly he tossed his coat aside, bent down, and took her in his arms.

"I could kill you."

She raised a white face that blazed back an equal passion.

"Then—kill me; you are my master."

He lifted her up, and holding her at arm's length, looked long and steadily into her eyes. She did not flinch from the bright glare of the light in his.

"No; I have saved you," he said. "You shall belong to me, body and soul."



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